Hugr
Gathering
Book 1 Harbinger Series
JOHAN COETSER

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Contents

License Agreement for *Hugr: Gathering* 1

Incipit 4

The Anchor 6

The Hunt 11

The Jarl 16

The Mission 21

Quarry Town 26

Siege 32

Battle 37

Desperation 42

Aftermath 53

The Mine 58

New Enemies 63

New Friends 69

Covenant 74

Epilogue 79

Incipit

The soft breeze rippled the green sea into playful whitecaps, carrying with it the sharp scent of brine. Dorothea drew a deep breath where she sat before the moss-clad stone sentinel, savouring the moment and her new mantle as Harbinger.

The wind teased her copper locks, now free of restraint, and a sigh of contentment slipped from her lips. It felt good simply to be alive after all that had passed.

Her new grey xiton draped elegantly over her slender frame, leaving her bare feet peeking from beneath the hem. Beside her lay her discarded sandals and headscarf, tokens of release.

In the distance, seagulls wheeled above the fishing boats drifting out from Hammarsfjord, eager to snatch a morsel from the nets. Dora counted five vessels rigged for cod.

To her right, smoke curled from countless chimneys, dissolving into the summer haze. Hammarsfjord now boasted a Jarl of its own.

Yet the serpent lingered in this northern paradise—she knew it well. Her mouth twisted in disgust as memory rose, only to be forced back into silence. Such shadows had no place beneath the sunlit sky.

The golden orb of the sun, just risen past dawn, reminded her why she had come to witness its birth. Hugr had whispered to her the night before, urging her to greet the morning at his side.

She watched the light break in the gentle company of the Ghost Breath—dew dripping softly, kissed away by the sun. His divine aura ennobled her even as it had once preserved her life.

Now she basked in the warmth, soaking in the rays after the long white winter, when death had stalked the land.

Her mother worried, as she always did.

“Is it safe for a girl to be alone out there, Dora?” she asked, tucking stray curls beneath her headscarf.

“I am no longer the child you once knew, Mama,” Dora replied, brushing a tender hand against her mother’s cheek. Her mother clasped it in her own worn palms.

“I am glad you are safe, my love, but…” She blinked back tears, and Dora blinked away her own.

“Time heals, Mama. I belong to Hugr now—he called me.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I know, and I do not regret your return. Yet in a way, I lost you both that day.”

Dora let the memory dissolve. Though that day would remain etched in her mind forever, she refused to let it rule her. What was done was done. The future awaited.

Hugr had summoned her to the ancient sentinel for a reason. Though she had known him only for a season, the god had claimed her heart. Strange, almost ironic, to think she once believed she understood him before.

Dora snorted. She had yet to grasp what it meant to return—to face a new life bound to Hugr, a reality entirely remade.

Harbingers did not walk easy or sheltered paths. For men, the dangers were grave enough—yet for women, the trials lay on another plane entirely. She knew hardship and toil awaited her, but she would not let them rule her heart.

She refused to yield to fear, refused to let it paralyse her. Some blamed her for her brother's death—as at times she blamed herself. Yet Hugr forbade her to brood; sorrow served no purpose.

And when her thoughts drifted, the Ghost Breath of Hugr was there beside her. Ever her companion, her guide, her Counsellor—reproving when needed, sustaining always. He was her heart.

Her stomach growled for the bread her mother had given her. Dora opened her sack, drew out the heavy round of barley bread, and held it before Hugr. She spoke the words of blessing, broke the loaf, and ate.

Crusty, filling, and fresh, she finished her breakfast quickly. A draught of stream water cooled her throat, and she stowed away the leather bottle. Then a frame of thought stirred within her heart.

She felt it rise—formed deep in her chest, climbing through her body until it burst open in her mind. Only then could she read it:

"Find the raven."

Hugr offered no reply. Dora bowed before him and murmured,

"Thy will be done."

She gathered her scattered belongings; her time in that pleasant haven had ended.

Above, gulls plunged at a bursting net, wings beating, cries sharp and greedy. A shadow of foreboding brushed her heart. She slipped on her sandals, tied her scarf beneath her chin, and lifted her sack.

It was time to seek the raven. Out on the sea, another boat hauled nets heavy with fish, and her spirit rose. She whistled a tune as she set upon the path, glad that Hugr had entrusted her with her first calling as Harbinger.

The Anchor

Dorothea Sophidamos drew her grey hood low, veiling the fine lines of her face. Summer had slipped into autumn, yet the raven Hugr had asked her to find did not appear, though she searched far and wide.

Her father had agreed to escort her to the Anchor, where gossip flowed as freely as ale. Even with his reassuring presence at her side, she faltered before the tavern door.

Chaste girls rarely crossed such thresholds. Her mother had only relented on the condition that her father accompany her. It had taken no small measure of persuasion to win his consent—but at last she had bended his will.

Now she faced not only the community's censure but also the prospect of the Dedicated descending upon her. She steadied her resolve.

The Anchor, at the end of her street, welcomed the fishing community—men and women bound to the trade. The men braved the boats, while the women prepared the catch for market.

Most of Hammarsfjord's cod sailed south to the Empire, though her father served instead in the watch. Dora gazed at the tavern's simple form: grey granite walls beneath a straw roof, stone hewn from the mountains.

Like most Dverg buildings, it carried a quiet weight, a presence that echoed her own home. Above the door hung a wooden sign, its black-stained anchor boldly declaring to all of Hammarsfjord that this was the tavern of the fishing folk.

Normally, even her father would hesitate to step into the lair of the fishing folk. But today he came on official business and so agreed to bring her along as his scribe—her fine hand was known.

He relented only because most of the north pier's fishing folk gathered here after work for a hard-earned ale. It was the perfect chance to reach them all at once.

For Dora, that meant a brief window to catch whispers of gossip while she served as scribe. On any other day, they would have barred the door to her, and perhaps they still might—but not today.

Hugr had whispered the name of the Anchor into her heart two nights ago. She had to come—had to explore every possibility to find the raven and complete her quest.

They stepped across the threshold into the tavern. Dora's eyes adjusted slowly to the gloom, pierced only by the flicker of lamps. She counted roughly twenty men and half as many women scattered through the common room.

Rushes covered the floor, and guests sat at long trestle tables. Along the far wall, the master kept a row of barrels from which he drew ale. Dora's nose wrinkled—the air was thick with the sharp tang of alcohol.

The murmur of conversation died the instant their presence was felt—cut off as cleanly as a knife. The master, a stocky Dverg with salt-and-pepper hair and beard, was the first to stir.

Before he could speak, her father raised his badge of office.

“Official business.”

“The Harbinger too,” the master growled.

“Yes. She’s a registered scribe with the watch,” her father replied, truthfully. She knew he had secured her place only by Hugr’s grace. So she produced her own badge of office in turn.

Her presence was sanctioned, and that alone persuaded her father to let her come. This was her first duty as a scribe of the watch, though she knew the captain had agreed only because she was the Harbinger.

Ordinary girls married from their fathers’ houses and did not pursue trades. Their lives were spent keeping house, assisting in the family’s work when needed, and raising children. But for a female Harbinger, marriage was only possible if Hugr permitted it—and that meant she required a trade of her own.

Her father wrestled long with the question once he accepted that Hugr held first claim upon her. It was not easy, yet at last he yielded, being a devout Dedicated. In the end, he judged that her fine hand marked her for the craft of a scribe.

So she raised her newly minted badge of office, indentured in service to the Jarl—a position her father assured her the Jarl himself had agreed to. The thought that the Jarl knew her name left her mind reeling.

The announcement that they were there on official business made the fisher folk close ranks. A wall of stony faces stared back at them.

“What business?” the master demanded.

“Because of recent events, we need more men on patrol,” her father replied.

He did not need to elaborate—especially with her standing in grey beside him, one of the chief actors in those very events. She had underestimated the weight of her presence.

Bringing her along was a shrewd move. Everyone knew how Harbingers came into being, and the advantage her presence lent against the clannish fisher folk likely tipped the scales in her father’s mind to allow her to come.

It had unfolded exactly as her father intended. The master’s face twisted into a mask of disgust as he gestured toward an empty table.

“Sit down, Watchman Hammar.”

They took their seats, and the Master set a lamp upon the table so she could see to write. Her father spoke steadily:

“I know this will be difficult, but the Jarl wants more men patrolling the streets. If enough of you agree to share the burden here, we can arrange flexible shifts. I will serve as watch commander for this street.”

“That suits me,” the master growled. “At least you live here, and…” His voice faltered. Dora noticed how he avoided her gaze, refusing to meet her eyes. She let it pass. Harbingers unsettled most people—her family included.

“ Write me up, “ the master said firmly. He sat down in front of Dora so that she could scribe the indenture documents. That broke the ice. Much to her surprise every man in the tavern volunteered.

She bent over the indenture documents until her hand cramped, stifling sneezes from the dust. Then, one woman rose. Dora studied her face—its slightly worn lines spoke of a hard life, yet lent her a quiet dignity, a beauty shaped by endurance.

“I am not against this,” the woman said, “but we all know it is dangerous. Will the Harbinger bless our blades to strike the Draugr?”

Suddenly Dora found herself the centre of attention. She froze, like a hare caught in a fox’s gaze. Her father stepped in.

“My Stjarna has already blessed the weapons of the entire watch.”

Relief flickered across more than one face. The woman exhaled softly.

“My son is not here, but he will join Commander Hammar. Where can he sign up?”

“My house will serve as the headquarters for now,” her dad explained.

“He’ll be there tomorrow,” she replied.

It took Dora more than two hours to finish the documents. While she worked, her father drew up schedules, mapped patrol routes, tallied weapon inventories, and organized the new watch.

Her ear caught a hushed exchange nearby.

“I heard the Jarl invited Captain Vethrafn to Hammarsfjord.”

She froze, her heart skipping a beat. She found her raven unexpectedly at the Anchor Tavern just as Hugr showed.

“Vethrafn,” she mused the next morning, seated at the makeshift desk her father had built for her. In the Dverg tongue, it meant Winter Raven. Dora idly wondered how a human had come to bear a Dverg name.

Her own Harbinger name, after all, was in the Imperial tongue—far removed from her native speech. The irony of a Dverg carrying an Imperial name never failed to

amuse her. Hugr had given it to her, along with the frame of tongues, so that she could now read, speak, and write Imperial where once she had known only Dverg.

The change from Stjarna Hammar to Dorothea Sophidamos had unsettled her mother most of all. She refused outright to call her Dorothea. Her father did, though at times he slipped back into the old name.

While joy stirred in her heart at finding her raven, the Head Elder of the Dedicated appeared at their door, ready to scold her parents for allowing her into the tavern. His rebuke left her mother in tears, her father rigid with silence, and her quietly amused at how swiftly gossip travelled.

She, however, paid him no mind. She answered to Hugr alone, not to him. Her father had walked the path of the Dedicated all his life, and so the family followed it too.

Yet it was only upon her return that she truly came to know Hugr for who he was. Neither the Elder nor her kin grasped his glory as she did. Indeed, most of the Dedicated seemed more unsettled in her presence than those outside their order.

They honoured Hugr through the Forms, while she walked beside him. She knew him personally, intimately—unlike them, who only approached him through ritual. Though they were good folk, these days their ways made her grind her teeth more often than not.

In that moment, she longed for the Elder to meet Hugr outside the Forms, if only to answer for the tears he had drawn from her mother.

He was not a cruel man, yet his rigidity wore on her. Still, she had found her raven, just as Hugr commanded. He withheld the next step, but she suspected it would unsettle the Elder deeply if he ever learned of it.

“Ah, er… Harbinger,” a young Dverg called, drawing her attention. He was about her age—thirty—with an open face and deep brown eyes. Dora immediately guessed who his mother must be.

“You’ve come to join the watch,” she said, catching him off guard.

His cheeks reddened as she grinned at him. Dora decided she liked him. She pulled the sheepskin parchment closer.

“Are you over twenty?”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Then let’s begin with your name.”

Her father had repurposed his old workroom into an office, building her a simple though Dverg sturdy desk to work at. She had helped him sand it smooth. The young man sat awkwardly in his chair while she wrote out the indenture papers.

“Four owls a shift,” she said. His eyes widened at the amount. “My fa… er, the Watch Commander will assign you to a patrol.”

It still felt unreal that her father now served as her watch commander, though she was spared the burden of rotations. Her hours ran from third bell until sundown, six days a week, with only Hugr’s day set apart.

Even then, the watch patrolled by turn so that all could join the Forms at least twice each month. As Harbinger, she had no choice but to attend—the Elder would breathe fire enough to scorch her if she missed even a single Form.

She let the young Dverg make his mark and sent him on to the yard, where her father drilled a handful of men in weapons. Dora frowned at the inventory. Most Dverg preferred the axe, both tool and weapon, yet her father insisted they carry spears as well. She sighed. More weapons to bless.

A fleeting memory rose—of a young Dverg hacking in vain at Draugr flesh bound by spell-craft. She crushed it ruthlessly, unwilling to let the sun glimpse such shadows she reserved only for the dark moon.

Instead, she summoned a brighter recollection: the same Dverg awkwardly pretending not to notice her newly minted pointed ears, the mark of a Harbinger. His furtive staring, masked by feigned indifference, had been hilarious.

Her ears unsettled the elders but enchanted the children. To them, round ears were the only familiar kind, and they delighted in touching her delicate pointed ones. Too young to grasp their meaning, they loved them simply for their strangeness.

“Dora,” her father called.

She rose from her desk and stepped outside. Four men stood waiting, staves in hand, among them the young Dverg. Her father was drilling them in the art of the spear.

“He brought spearheads. Please bless them.”

She walked over to take the package from the nervous young man. The apprentice nearly dropped the package, squeaking as her fingers brushed against his hands. Her mischievous grin only deepened his embarrassment, and he bolted down the road to the sound of guffaws from the men in the yard.

Dora carried the spearheads into her office, unwrapped the parcel, and studied the deadly shapes gleaming within. Then she sat, seeking stillness for her soul.

The Ghost Breath—ever present—stirred more strongly around her. Dora began to chant the frame of blessing, her voice soft yet steady. She felt Hugr respond, weaving his power into the weapons, sanctifying them to rend Draugr flesh.

While the Dedicated could bless weapons through elaborate Forms, a Harbinger’s blessing was swifter—immediate, requiring little time.

Her expression hardened. In recent years, Draugr had multiplied, and the Jarl was right to expand the watch. Dora knew the Empire had agreed to cover the cost—her father had told her so.

It was fortunate, too. The citizens of Hammarsfjord could not bear heavier taxes. She smiled as the blessing seeped into the spears, turning them into venom against the Draugr. Served them right.

The Hunt

Life settled into a steady rhythm—running the office, spending time with Hugr, attending Forms with the Dedicated, and helping her mother at home. Two weeks slipped by in a blink as she waited for the raven to reach Hammarsfjord.

Rumour held that he would arrive in the spring. In the meantime, Hugr convened his own council on the matter, leaving her with no choice but patience.

Every new member of the watch now carried a blessed spear. She even extended the blessing to their belt knives, though most of the other streets relied on weapons sanctified by the Dedicated.

More embarrassingly, folk no longer called their street North Pier Street, but Harbinger Street. At first she protested, but it made no difference. People ignored her protests, even as they tried to pretend she was nothing more than an ordinary young woman with the odd habit of wearing grey.

No one spoke of her pointed ears. Occasionally someone's gaze would linger, startled, before they caught themselves and resumed the pretence that she was simply a Dverg girl.

It helped that she never repeated the infamous tavern escapade—an incident that, rumour claimed, had reached the Jarl's ears. Since no one came to drag her to the stocks, she assumed it had not troubled him.

Seated behind her desk, cloaked against the autumn chill, she felt a void open in her chest. A frame of thought rose, drifting upward until it crystallized in her mind:

"The Draugr will come soon."

Her heart lurched, breath catching.

"Get a grip, Dorothea Sophidamos," she muttered through clenched teeth.

A few steady breaths calmed her. Then she rose, drew her cloak tighter, and stepped outside. Her father was overseeing spear training. She paused, watching as the four men moved deliberately through the Forms.

Her father trained four different men each day, drilling them for three hours. To her surprise, there was little grumbling. Even her older brother, who owned a fishing boat, took his turn—though he never joined the watch.

“We already have two family members in the watch. We don’t need a third,” he said, ruffling her hair.

“I’m not part of the watch,” she protested, swatting his hand away.

He grinned. “If you say so.”

“You’re asking for it, Leik Hammar,” she growled, chasing him until their mother called her in to help with dinner.

Her father noticed her wool-gathering and strolled over.

“Come to join the drills, pet?”

She stared at him, aghast.

“The Head Elder will descend on our household like a fiery dragon, Daddy.”

A wide grin split his face.

“He cannot be more aghast than he already is,” Elder Hammar said, unrepentant.

Dora glanced around, worried that someone might have overheard. No one seemed to pay attention.

“Daddy,” she hissed.

He only chuckled. “Do you want something, pet?”

Leaning closer, she lowered her voice.

“The Draugr are coming.”

He shifted in an instant—from indulgent parent to hard-bitten, tough-as-nails Watch Commander.

“When?”

“Soon.”

His face hardened as he calculated: men, rosters, who needed to be informed—the works.

“Write a letter to the Jarl,” he ordered, gripping her shoulders. “Keep this close. I don’t want a panic.”

The command nearly made her squeak with panic herself. Write a letter to the Jarl? She?

Instead, she nodded.

“As you ordered, Watch Commander.”

Then she trotted back to her office to carry out his command. Dora frowned at the vellum before her. Hugr had granted her the gift of tongues, and she was well

schooled in the flourishes of courtly speech. Yet the Jarl was a plain man, famed for his disdain of ornament.

She bit her lip, dipped her pen, and wrote:

To Jarl Járn, greetings.

The word of Hugr came to me today: Draugr will soon arrive in Hammarsfjord, though the hour was not revealed.

Your obedient servant,

Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos

She set the letter aside to let the ink dry. Her father would need to seal it before it could be sent, yet Dora knew he was far too shrewd to hurry—lest anyone take notice.

He finished his training before coming in. Dora watched anxiously as he read the letter. At last, he gave a curt nod.

“It will do.”

Relief washed over her as he folded the parchment, melted the wax, and pressed his seal deep into it. Then, with practised ease, he slipped the letter into the front of his xiton.

She watched as he swung his cloak over one shoulder and fastened his sword at his side. Her gaze lingered on the intricate hilt of his official blade. Until she became his scribe and saw him train, it had never occurred to her that he was a warrior.

He set his cap on his head, flashed her a grin, and said,

“I may be late for dinner.”

Then he was gone, leaving her reply unspoken. She closed her mouth, knowing Mama would be displeased if he missed the meal—especially since Leik, his wife, and their baby were expected to visit.

Her day dragged on without word, each hour sharpening her unease. By the time the tavern master stepped into her office, she was on the verge of losing her composure. Dora forced her irritation down and managed a steady tone:

“Master, how may I assist you?”

“I am looking for the Watch Commander.”

“He left for the Massive not long ago.”

His mouth opened, then closed again, the words swallowed before they could form. Something was stirring, but he clearly had no wish to draw her into it.

He bowed.

“I thank you, Harbinger.”

Then he departed. The vision struck her without warning…

A tall figure appeared—human, with raven hair spilling freely over his shoulders, sharp grey eyes fixed upon her letter. The scene was so immediate she could smell the charcoal brazier's smoke curling in the air. His gaze shifted to her father.

"This is troubling…"

The vision dissolved, leaving her breathless. Her raven had already reached Hammarsfjord, though his arrival remained a closely guarded secret.

Dora leaned back, turning the matter over in her mind. Vethrafn's presence in the Massive meant the plot was further advanced than she had guessed. From what she had seen, her father knew him.

They had chosen to keep her in the dark—likely in some misguided attempt at protection. But Hugr would not allow that.

They needed to understand what a Harbinger was. Hammarsfjord had produced few of her kind in all the port's long history, and the people had no idea how to deal with Harbingers.

Some called her wise; the ill-disposed whispered "witch," while the Dedicated sought to silence her. The rest could not forget the sight of her brutalized, drained corpse before Hugr restored her.

"They should ask why he sent me back," she hissed, frustration burning in her voice.

It was never her place to sit idle while events took shape. The tavern master had meant to tell her father something bound to the plot, but she needed no whisper from the Ghost Breath to confirm her suspicions.

The Draugr was on the move, and the men had calculated their interception. In their minds, there was no need for meddling Harbingers. Yet while she had no desire to face a Draugr in person ever again, she knew they could not track it without her.

Hugr never imposed himself on anyone. All she could do was wait until they grew wise. So she remained at her desk, patient, watching as the tide of events gathered around her.

Much to her surprise, Papa arrived on time for the family dinner. He fussed over the baby and traded easy jokes with her brother, yet she could feel the distance he kept. His body was present, but his mind seemed elsewhere—already bent on the hunt she was certain had begun.

Dora dipped fresh bread into Mama's rich pottage, savouring the flavours of cabbage, bacon, onions, herbs, and what she liked to call the mother factor.

The men drank ale, while the women sipped maltshade—light, fruity, mildly alcoholic, with a lingering grainy aftertaste.

She noticed the strain around her mother's eyes—a detail she would once have overlooked. Mama, it seemed, knew something was amiss. The baby must have sensed it too, for it began to fuss. Leik rolled his eyes.

"That's our signal to leave," he quipped, stroking his wife's blond hair. Frida smiled up at him, too absorbed in calming the child to catch the subtext.

Together they bundled the baby warmly for the short walk home. It was only four houses down, yet that was all it took when the Draugr came for her and her brother.

The assault struck without warning. Her brother drew his sword, but the unblessed steel could not bite through Draugr-bound flesh. Its quick, venomous bites left both siblings paralysed.

Her stomach twisted as memory surged—the helpless terror, the venom binding her limbs, silencing even her screams. She had returned; her brother had not.

Dora blinked free of the dark recollection. This time her elder brother carried a blessed side-sword, and he knew its use. Besides, Papa would stand watch outside until they came home.

His grim expression on returning told Dora that her father carried the same dark thoughts. Her mother tried to mask the raw pain of that fateful night, but a moment too late—Dora had already seen it in her eyes.

For the countless time, she wondered if Mama blamed her for surviving when Bridr had not. Though the Hammar matron never spoke of it, Dora had caught her mother's gaze more than once, heavy with a peculiar, unspoken meaning.

"It's best we don't host family dinners for now," Papa said.

"They are back." Anna Hammar's words were not a question but a declaration, delivered with force.

"Yes."

The stark reply fell into their circle like a knell of doom. Anna swung toward Dora.

"You knew," she hissed.

"I knew…" Dora tried to said more, but the words would not come. Her mother turned abruptly and stormed off to her room, leaving behind a silence thick and awkward.

After a pause, Papa cleared his throat.

"The search teams are out. They will find it."

Dora stifled the urge to snort. She only nodded, summoning the strength to hold herself in, to resist shouting at him.

"No. They will not find it without my help."

Instead, she gathered the dishes for washing, listening to the low murmur of her parents' voices from their room. She could feel the malignant presence of the Draugr in town. It would not strike immediately, but first scout Hammarsfjord.

Later, she lay in bed, listening to her father's steady snore. The dishes done, she had withdrawn to her room to commune with Hugr, resting in the Ghost Breath's embrace, wrapped in its divine aura.

Reality struck the instant she stepped beyond that cocoon. A Draugr prowled the town, its aura muffled so that she could sense only a vague it is here. The impulse to awaken her dóry and hunt it pressed hard against her reason.

Only fear—and the Ghost Breath's restraining presence—kept her from leaping from her bed.

Sleep claimed her soul at last.

"Wake and ward, beloved."

The voice roused her beneath a pale half-sickle moon. Her dóry flared instantly, shaping a divine shield and sword that hardened into steel in her grasp.

Her nightgown dissolved into a battle xiton, war sandals lacing her feet. Heart pounding, she crouched before the window, shield raised, sword poised in middle guard.

It was there—just beyond the shutters.

The stench of carrion mingled with sulphur, choking her throat, slicking her palms with fear.

"Hold your stance, pet," her father's voice steadied from behind. She resisted the pull to glance back, to draw comfort from his solid presence. Dora swallowed, steeling her resolve. The festival of young men had begun, and she was ready for it.

The Jarl

Papa's voice was low, steady.

"If it bursts through, meet it with your shield—then drive your blade into its gut." He stepped into line at her right, sword poised in middle guard.

Outside, Dora heard the wet snuffle as the creature shifted its weight. Her father swept her behind him with his left arm, taking the front.

"Hold your stance," he cautioned.

Then came the voice—horrifyingly ordinary, almost casually:

"Your blood tasted so delicious."

Her stomach clenched; terror blistered her thoughts. For an instant she felt the teeth at her neck again—until the Ghost Breath eased her mind with chilling gentleness.

Her father ripped the shutters open with a violent crash, thrusting at the pale face beyond. The creature slipped back, evading the strike, a sneer twisting its death-mask features.

“Ormr was not pleased that I forged a Harbinger,” it growled. “My lord demands your head.”

Papa raised his sword, point levelled at its face, guard held high. Dora held her stance as he had commanded.

“I will devour your entire family—yes, even the infant—in revenge,” it smirked.

Ice seized her lungs, panic rising to choke her. But before she could falter, the thing shrieked as a bolt pierced its neck.

Her father vaulted through the window, his blade driving into its sternum, punching clean through. Dora rushed forward to see him crouched over the Draugr.

“None of your kind,” he hissed, “will ever feed on my children again.”

He twisted his wrist, freeing the blade, then lifted it back into guard.

“Do not assume it is alone, pet.”

Dora flushed at her rookie mistake, fingers tightening on her hilt again after she almost released her dóry.

Mama’s hand settled on her shoulder.

“Keep back from the window, Stjarna.”

Obediently, Dora shuffled away, though every nerve strained to see what unfolded outside. She could hear her father speaking to someone, but she dared not risk her mother’s wrath by disobeying.

The unseen man asked a question.

She was waiting with a shield and short sword,” her father replied, pride unhidden in his voice.

Mama, however, was not amused.

“The dolt,” she hissed, then turned sharply on Dora.

“Get rid of that before anyone sees it and runs to tattle.”

Dora gauged her mother’s mood and wisely let go of her dóry. Tonight had torn open old wounds for them all. With the excitement fading, the ache of her younger brother’s absence returned in full force. She could see Mama fighting hard not to cry, too.

Mama crossed to the window and shut the shutters firmly.

“Get in bed.”

Then she was gone, leaving Dora bemused. She climbed under the covers—not to sleep, but to commune with Hugr. It was plain as daylight that this thing had come for her alone. And the men, she realized, must have guessed and laid their ambush.

They had used her as bait. Dora could not decide how to feel about that. Mama, on the other hand, was likely plotting to brain Daddy. Dora idly wondered if Leik had known too—and, more troubling still, why Hugr had kept her in the dark.

Daddy must have kept watch all night. He still wore his livery and carried his service sword when he stepped into her room. Dora bit her lip, frustrated that Mama had shut her out of the fascinating conversation unfolding outside. Someone out there clearly knew far more about Draugr than she did.

It made her wonder how they—whoever they were—had convinced her father to go along with the plan of using Dorothea Sophidamos, née Stjarna Hammar, as bait.

“What were you thinking, Snorri?” Mama whispered in the corridor. Though she tried to keep her voice low, Dora could hear the edge of hysteria in her tone.

“He can protect her, Anna,” Daddy answered defensively.

“You used her as bait!”

Her mother’s voice rose at the end before the door shut Dora out of the conversation once more. It frustrated her to catch only fragments like this. Sleep might have been the best medicine, but Dora knew closing her eyes would be impossible.

Seeing a Draugr in the flesh again had struck harder than she imagined. That pale, lifeless mass replayed before her eyes, making her gorge rise. She snatched up the pot just in time to retch into it.

She heaved until her middle ached with painful dry spasms, while snot and tears streamed down her face.

Then she dissolved into tears. She wept for her lost innocence, her lost brother, her broken trust—for the agony and terror of death itself. She cried until no tears remained, until she lay on her bed reduced to dry hiccups.

The release left her drained, yet strangely at peace. A comforting presence—the Ghost Breath—enfolded her… and she woke to bright sunlight, startled that sleep had claimed her.

Dora sat up in shock.

“I drew a bath, love. Come and wash…”

“Work…”

“You’ve been given furlough pending reassignment,” Mama replied, before leaving, unwilling to linger in conversation.

The half-barrel of hot water steamed in the kitchen. Dora did not need to be asked twice; she undressed and slipped into the warmth. Mama handed her a bar of soap.

“Wash your hair, too.”

Dora lingered, letting the heat and lather wash away the weight of last night. Mama showed no sign of anger, only a faint stiffness in her posture. Dora wisely held her tongue, choosing not to ask what Mama thought about… things.

Last night tore open wounds of grief she thought had long since healed. Seeing that thing stripped away every illusion of control, leaving her raw and exposed.

The men had explanations to give. How dare they use her as bait! She rinsed the last of the soap from her hair, mind circling the question: who was that man outside—Vethrafn?

She knew him only by reputation, one of the Empire’s rising war captains famed for tactical innovation. Beyond that, all she had was the vision.

Hugr did not show her much in the vision either. He only let her know her raven arrived and knew her father of all people. How this was all connected remained a mystery.

Dora climbed out of the tub and patted herself dry. Mama moved to help, working gently through her mop of thick curls. From beneath her damp fringe, Dora studied Mama’s closed expression.

“Our whole family will be moving into the Massive for now,” Mama said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Your father, in his infinite wisdom, has agreed that all of us should move there.”

The sudden revelation left Dora blinking in shock. She understood her father’s desire to move the family to safety, but she had never imagined he would take them to the Massive—the seat of the Jarl.

It seemed almost unreasonable that the Jarl had agreed to host them. Mama helped Dora into her grey xiton.

“Why are Harbingers only allowed to wear grey?” she asked crossly.

Anna’s frustration was less about the colour of her clothes than about the move itself.

Dora was unsure how she felt about becoming part of the Jarl’s court. All she knew came from tales, jongleurs, and the usual gossip—seasoned, of course, with the dark whispers of plots and counterplots passed behind cupped hands.

Hugr had remained silent on the matter, so she simply went along with the current. She ate her porridge while Mama wrestled her wild locks into order.

“There. Done.”

Dora swallowed her last bite and rose to collect the dishes, but Mama waved her off.

“Shoo, go on. I’ll call you when I need you.”

Since Mama might need her, she withdrew to her room to commune with Hugr. Normally, she sought this stillness before dawn, but recent events had thrown her rhythm awry. Yet the blessing of the Ghost Breath soothed her, as always.

A thought crystallized in her heart—one word: spinel. This jewel was famed for its use in the three drops of blood that dripped from Hugr’s throat when he appeared as a ram upon the altars of the Dedicated. The same stone was chosen for the silver ram amulets worn around their necks.

Dora slipped hers off to examine it: a silver ram with two heavy horns, its three drops of blood fashioned from tiny spinels. As she gazed at it, a vision of a cliff rose before her.

“Give this gift to the raven,” Hugr whispered into her heart.

A spinel mine would ease the town’s economic burden, especially if the stones proved to be of fine quality. Since the mine was a gift from Hugr, she never doubted its worth. He would not command her to offer Captain Vethrafn mere frit. In her heart, she knew the veins would yield gems of the highest grade.

When Hugr’s voice came with orders, she rose from her bed and prepared for the day. Mama would need help around the house, even if she tried to shoo her away.

“Dora.”

Papa stood in the doorway.

“Come with me. We must present ourselves at court.”

She blinked in surprise. Their humble rank did not merit an invitation to the court. Her father must have guessed her thoughts.

“It’s about last night,” he said.

Her heart stilled. Last night had been a nightmare she longed to forget, yet powers beyond her moved her being. The hand of Hugr was plain in all of it. He wanted her to meet the raven, and Dora did not doubt for a moment that he would be present at the court.

“We will meet in the Privy Council. It is a secret gathering.”

All the better, she thought. Announcing something of such economic weight as a spinel mine should remain hidden until the location and richness of the deposit could be confirmed.

Dora tied her scarf beneath her chin and settled her amulet—her only piece of jewellery—against her breast. In its way, the little ram served as her badge of office, together with her grey attire.

“I am ready,” she said.

Unfortunately, the delicate tips of her newly minted pointed ears had a way of slipping through her hair, trumpeting her status as Harbinger for all to see. The grey clothing alone might have passed unnoticed, but the ears unsettled people. They reminded everyone that she had crossed the veil—died and returned.

Few felt comfortable in her presence. Even her family sometimes showed unease, though her parents accepted her return more readily than most. People could ignore the grey attire, dismiss it as a dull fashion choice, until they saw the ears. That was when the illusion broke, and she was no longer just another young woman.

Mama waved from the hearth, stirring something in a pot that smelled wonderful. Dora’s stomach gurgled in gleeful anticipation, though dinner was still hours away. She followed Papa out into the street, where a cart filled with straw awaited them.

“The thatcher promised us a ride,” Papa said.

Dora dipped her fingers into a greeting, forming the blessing. The thatcher accepted it with a nod, though she caught the slightly wild side glance he gave her. Choosing caution, she climbed up on the opposite side of Papa. She had no wish to see the poor man bolt down the road if he accidentally touched her—such things had happened before.

The thatcher clicked his tongue, and the horse leaned into its harness. The cart jolted over the ruts, carrying them to the end of the street and the public fountain where the street drew its water. Dora’s stomach twisted with nerves. She was truly going to stand before the Jarl—and meet her raven.

Her vision had shown only a glimpse: a towering figure, a man rising above the Dverg folk, who rarely reached five feet and were often shorter still. Dora herself was tall for a Dverg woman, just under five feet, though her slender frame did little to help. A foreign sailor had once mistaken her for a child, despite her thirty years. She wondered how her raven would see her.

The Mission

The Massive was a Dverg-built fortress in the ancient style—essentially a mountain of stone, enduring even in this modern age of gunpowder weapons. Their cart stopped before the Port Gate, the main entrance, though only the smaller side gate stood

open. The guards waved them through at the sight of her father, which told Dora he was no stranger to the Massive.

They stepped into the bailey beyond the gate. It was Dora's first time inside. Four men in half-armour sat on a bench against the opposite wall, arquebuses resting at their sides. They ignored her, but she noticed their slow matches were already lit. Most girls might not have understood what that meant, but Dora had grown up in a military household.

She guessed their weapons were loaded and primed to fire—perhaps because of Captain Vethrafn's presence, or the threat of Draugr. To her amusement, these hard-bitten Dverg warriors took one look at her grey clothes and pointed ears, then pretended she was invisible.

The tunnel at the far side of the bailey stood open, though the portcullis could be dropped at a moment's notice. Cold and dark filled the passage, but her keen Dverg dark vision revealed the murder holes cut into the ceiling above.

On the other side, a high servant in black-and-white livery awaited them. He bowed.

"Watch Commander and Harbinger, welcome. Please follow me."

They trailed him into the Warren, a labyrinth designed to confound enemies. The High Servant moved through it with the ease of long familiarity. Beyond lay another bailey, guarded by four warriors armed with crossbows. Even a Draugr would struggle to breach the defences of the Massive. These warriors nodded to her father and, like the first watch, pretended she was nothing more than his shadow.

A courtyard with a garden awaited them beyond. The gardener and his apprentices were at work, pruning shrubs and pulling weeds. One boy's eyes widened, his face turning bone white when he realized what she was. Dora felt the urge to stick out her tongue at him but refrained—he might have fainted on the spot if she had.

The High Servant guided them aside, away from the arched door with its brass-work, leading around the corner of the Port Keep. Dora knew the Massive mirrored this design at the Mountain Gate as well. On that side, the Warren led to the Mountain Keep, with both Keeps guarding the Central Keep, itself protected by its own Warren system.

The Jarl lived in the central keep with his family. It also housed the famed Cathedral of Hugr, where the Head Elder ministered. Dora had never been allowed inside, even after becoming a Harbinger. She attended the Forms in a simple chapel that served four streets, where one of the other Elders kept the Service. At times, the Head Elder himself would lead the Forms there—mostly, she suspected, because she was present, rather than from any desire to serve the lower orders.

The High Servant led them along the side of the Port Keep, past numerous smaller buildings—though some were quite extensive. Dverg in livery similar to his, though less elaborate, busied themselves with various tasks. Most were men, with only a few

women visible. They paid little attention to the newcomers, unless one noticed the meaning of her grey xiton.

Reactions varied: some turned pale, others made the sign against evil, and more than a few suddenly remembered urgent business elsewhere. At first, such responses had unsettled her, but now she found them either amusing or tiresome, depending on her mood.

Today, it amused her to watch people scurry at the sight of her. She knew superstition could easily turn into persecution, yet she refused to let that possibility weigh on her mind. Hugr knew what he was doing, and what he planned for her. She would not fall prey to such fears, even though the Head Elder made no secret of his dislike. He kept it close to his chest, playing it safe.

Few dared bring a curse upon themselves by harming one so clearly sanctified by Hugr, returned in such unmistakable fashion. Horror stories abounded of those who had disrespected Harbingers, and they had circulated ever since her return.

The High Servant led them to a low building with no windows, its iron-bound door set into blank stone walls that concealed its purpose. He opened the door wide.

“He is waiting inside,” he said, bowed, and withdrew.

Papa stepped through first, with Dora following close behind. Her mouth formed an ‘oh’ as she beheld the rows of gleaming battle-axes. It was an armoury. Her eyes traced the lines of weapons all the way to the tall figure standing at the far end. The sight was disconcerting—like beholding a giant, or a lawful ogre.

He held a battle-axe in one hand, but what truly drew her attention was his sheer size. She estimated him to stand well over six feet, ebony locks flowing freely across his shoulders, bound by a leather tie at the back. The dark silk of his hair contrasted sharply with the pure white of his xiton. His back was turned, allowing her to take in the breadth of his shoulders, the trim waist, and the long, powerful legs.

He wore trousers rather than hose, tucked neatly into gleaming knee boots. His only weapon was a quillon dagger at his belt, and she could tell it was blessed. The moment they entered the armoury, he turned—unleashing the full force of his hawk-like face, piercing black eyes, and proud, pale features.

Her breath caught as the weight of his charisma enveloped her, reminding her sharply that she was a woman and a Harbinger. Her mouth went dry, her heart fluttered beneath his gaze, though she refused to let her cheeks betray her with roses of emotion.

“Welcome Commander, Your Excellency, to this meeting. I am Captain Vethrafn.”

Dora glanced around in confusion, searching for the Excellency. Yet there was no one else—only the three of them. She blinked at him, belatedly tracing the sigil of greeting, struggling not to blush.

Vethrafn returned the gesture, raising it in the high position reserved for those of exalted rank. The honour left her bemused, for he was clearly of noble blood.

He bowed.

“Forgive me for testing Your Excellency’s resolve last night with the spawn of Ormr. We had to strike swiftly, before it fed. Another Harbinger instructed me to act thus before I departed the capitol.”

It was plain she faced a master of strategy—he had disarmed her before she could accuse him of using her as bait. By invoking Hugr’s command, he swept the ground from beneath her feet.

No doubt that was how he had won her father’s favour as well.

“Hugr’s will is sacrosanct,” she murmurs, too bemused to add more.

“I am relieved by Your Excellency’s grace.”

His gaze lingered on the row of battle-axes, the discerning eye of a seasoned warrior measuring their worth. Vethrafn replaced the one he had hefted upon the rack.

“Excellent heft and balance—Dverg steel at its finest,” he says. Then his eyes turned to Dora. “The former Harbinger commanded me to meet Your Excellency the next day and await instructions. His Grace the Jarl approved my strategy.”

His words placed her on the spot—not because she lacked instructions, but because of the startling reverence he projected toward her.

“My lord revealed to me the site of a spinel mine.”

Vethrafn stilled, hawk-like, poised on the edge of a strike. Her father stirred as well, tapping his index finger thoughtfully against his lips.

“His Majesty approved a generous budget for this,” Vethrafn says, eyes gleaming. “Yet it covers only a year. We can divert part of it to fund the mine.”

It surprised her that he accepted her claim so readily. Then again, his familiarity with Harbingers made such trust less surprising than it seemed.

“Do you know the location of the mine, Your Excellency?”

Dora pursed her lips in thought.

“My lord revealed only that it lies north of Quarry Town.”

Vethrafn exchanged a glance with her father.

“That would be the granite mine, one day’s march north, Commander.”

“Aye, Captain.”

His eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“Very well. We have our orders. Now we can begin planning the mission.”

He turned to her father.

“Did you, perchance, persuade your lady wife last night, Commander?”

Elder Hammar grinned, shamefaced.

“I escaped being brained by a hair’s breadth, Captain. Yet she agreed in the end.”

Dora decided she did not wish to know why her father’s eyes gleamed so. Fortunately, their house was solidly Dverg-built; sound did not carry.

“Excellent. Then it is settled. We depart in three days’ time.”

He smiled at Dora.

“ Your new maid awaits you outside, Your Excellency. She will conduct you to your new chambers. “

She knew a dismissal when she heard it albeit a very polite and diplomatic one. It was obvious that the men wanted to talk and did not want a woman around.

So she gifted Vethrafn the high sigil and her dad the informal one.

“I will leave you gentlemen to it.”

A tiny Dverg girl, scarcely four feet tall, waited outside. Dora judged her to be no more than eighteen. Enormous cornflower-blue eyes, framed by flyaway blonde hair and brightened by the dimple in her wide smile, gazed up at her.

She raised the high sigil.

“Please follow me, Your Excellency.”

Dora glanced around, a flicker of panic in her eyes.

“Do not call me that. I am a commoner, like you.”

“No, Your Excellency. By Imperial law, Harbingers hold a rank equal to a Presbyter of the First Order and must be addressed as such, whether male or female.”

Only then did Dora notice the child’s dialect—it was not local. She wore a white xiton trimmed with grey, the livery of service to a Harbinger.

A grin spread across her face as she realized she outranked the Head Elder, who was merely a Presbyter of the Fifth Order. No wonder his attitude toward her was so ambivalent.

Though new to Hammarsfjord, the child walked with unfaltering stride. She had likely arrived on the same ship as Captain Vethrafn, brought along for this very task.

That meant her allegiance lay with Vethrafn, despite the innocence in her eyes and the dimples in her smile. Dora cringed as the girl stopped before the brass-bound official door.

The door swung wide, revealing the High Servant—the same who had first escorted her and her father to the armoury.

“Who comes?” he intoned.

Dora braced herself, certain she would be accused of presuming a rank she did not own—dragged off to the stocks for trial—when the child declared:

“I present Her Excellency, the Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos, to His Grace, the Jarl of Hammarsfjord.”

The High Servant stepped aside.

“Welcome beneath the roof of His Grace Jarl Járn, Your Excellency.”

He raised the high sigil and bowed her into the hall. Dora fought to keep her composure, resisting the urge to gape at the cathedral-like vastness that opened behind him.

Soaring buttresses arched overhead, their grandeur softened by stained-glass windows depicting the Forms. Jewel-like patterns spilled across the vast floor of the Festhall, shimmering in quiet majesty.

The hall lay empty save for the High Servant.

“Please follow me to your chambers, Your Excellency.”

Dora halted at the threshold of her new chambers, astonished. The High Servant presented her with the high sigil and intoned:

“His Grace will host Your Excellency for dinner tonight in the Central Keep. Captain Vethrafn has pledged to escort Your Excellency. A tray will be brought later. Please excuse me.”

With that, he departed, leaving her to gaze in bemusement at the opulence before her.

Quarry Town

Dora had only ever heard of such luxury in the grand tales sung by jongleurs at festive gatherings. Now, blinking in disbelief, she stood within a solar that seemed to be hers, its balcony opening onto a sweeping view of the harbour.

A true carpet, woven in many threads, lay across the floor. The furniture gleamed with beeswax polish, each piece crafted from precious yellowwood by master hands. Bright tapestries depicting the Forms adorned the once-bare walls.

Two doors led from the solar, proof that this space was larger than a single chamber. Raised in a frugal household, Dora's instinct was to ask for something simpler—one modest room to share with her new maid.

In her heart, she knew they would never permit it. Even she understood that a Presbyter of the First Rank stood just beneath the Jarl himself, outranking most of his court.

To surrender such chambers would heap shame upon their heads, and that would not suit Hugr, who expected her to carry herself with grace at all times.

The child, however, felt no such restraint. She stepped boldly onto the carpet, grinning wide, her eyes alight with a mischievous knowing that could not be hidden.

"Tell me your name, you little minx."

She dimpled broadly, anticipation shining too brightly in her face.

"I am Jarlsdóttir Aurndögg Járn—but you may call me Aurn."

Her vision narrowed as her thoughts caught up with the clues: the fine weave of her livery, her ease in approaching the door, her unhesitating step upon the carpet—all spoke of a noble child, well fostered.

Her eyes narrowed as the shock ebbed. She studied the child's smug expression, the sparkle of glee at her own joke.

"Did you plot this, Aurn?"

The reply came swift, unrepentant. "Yes."

"Do you understand what the grey in your xiton signifies?" Dora asked, expecting a glib retort.

"It means you died in torment and returned from beyond the veil."

The sober expression masked old horrors as she studied Dora grimly.

"He forced me to look at your bodies after…"

Dora opened her arms, and Aurn rushed into her embrace. She clasped the child tightly, fury burning that the Jarl had compelled his young daughter to witness her mangled corpse.

"I was there when you returned. One moment your face was ashen, your eyes glassy and staring. Then they turned on me with confusion. I saw… and then I saw the tips of your ears poke through your hair, and I knew…"

She cradled the shuddering child in her arms, as she finally surrendered to the terror that had haunted her for months, dissolving into a fit of weeping.

“It was so horrible… I hated seeing what that thing did. Afterwards, I had nightmares—terrible ones—where I was the one lying on the ground,” she choked out.

“Hush now, Aurndögg. It is behind us,” Dora soothed, stroking the slender back in slow, circular motions.

“How did you return?” she asked, her voice muffled against Dora’s shoulder.

“I could return because Hugr did it first.”

“You mean the wound on his neck… and the three drops of blood?”

“As you say.”

“He is not truly a ram, is he?”

Dora grinned above the child’s head.

“No, silly—that’s only a metaphor.”

“What a relief.”

Aurn leaned back, a watery smile trembling on her lips.

“I am not much of an impressive Jarlsdóttir, am I?”

Dora brushed a tear from the corner of her eye with her thumb, then tucked a strand of fine blonde hair back beneath her scarf.

“I am rather cross with your noble father for forcing you into such trials at so young an age.”

“Do not be angry with him,” Aurn said softly. “He jolted me out of my complacent, comfortable life. That is why, when the time came to foster, I chose you.”

Dora frowned.

“Don’t you have to foster at another court?”

Aurn’s face lit up as she looked up at her.

“Port Keep counts as a different court. His Majesty granted you this keep as your seat as a Presbyter of the First Order. Captain Vethrafn holds the Mountain Keep by the same decree. You even receive an Imperial stipend to cover its upkeep.”

Dora covered her face with both hands.

“May Hugr be merciful and keep me humble.”

The child gently pulled her hands apart, beaming.

“You won’t grow a fat head like I did. Besides, your High Servant will manage the day-to-day affairs of your court.”

Aurn seized her hand.

“Her Majesty prepared a suite of clothing for you when my father told them about you. Come and see.”

Dora’s mouth fell open as she stepped into her chamber—an enormous bed draped in rich fabric, another carpet underfoot, tapestries on the walls, and gleaming yellowwood furniture.

Aurn bounced onto the bed and lifted a grey xiton. Dora saw at once it was made to fit her perfectly, its silk shimmering with silver embroidery.

There were more treasures—nightgowns, slippers, garments of every kind. The two of them spent a blissful hour exploring the trove, laughing and giggling like children set loose in a dream.

Later, Dora sat on her balcony, savouring the fresh bread someone had brought her. Soft, chewy, and fragrant, it seemed to melt on her tongue. Across from her, Aurn nibbled at a handful of nuts, her gaze fixed on Dora.

“I knew your tastes were plain, like my father’s, so I ordered only bread and nuts for your repast. Besides, tonight Papa will receive you. He and Mama have been preparing this feast ever since your return.”

Dora lowered the bread, her thoughts turning inward. Hugr had given her wealth, honour, status, a court of her own, even this noble house—but none of it mattered unless he foresaw something she did not, which was likely the case.

The lavish gift of the spinel mine suddenly seemed to fit into place.

My father asked you to divide the proceeds of the spinel mine.”

Dora studied Aurndögg for a moment. Her little fosterling knew far more than she let on. Only that morning had she spoken to Vethrafn about the mine, and already the Jarl had acted.

“Since the mine is a gift from Hugr with a purpose, I will ask him how its proceeds should be used.”

Aurn popped a nut into her mouth.

“That makes a lot of sense.” Her eyes gleamed with curiosity. “How do you do that?”

Dora smiled at the child’s unguarded wonder.

“If you promise to sit quietly, I will commune with Hugr about this.”

The small hand shot up eagerly.

“I will be as quiet as a mouse.”

Dora hid her smile at the odd blend of sophistication and innocence the child displayed. She began to chant the frame of communion and felt the Ghost Breath enfold her.

Later, she opened her eyes to find Aurn staring at her in open-mouthed wonder.

“I felt him—Hugr, I mean,” she exclaimed. “He was here. I never felt that during the Forms.” Her eyes gleamed. “Is it always like this?”

Dora gently patted her head.

“Yes, always. Write Hugr’s instructions.”

Aurn hurried to fetch parchment, ink, and pen, then sat expectantly before Dora.

“Half will go to the war fund. The other half will be divided into shares: one share to Their Majesties, one to the Imperial Court. The three Keeps—Mountain, Central, and Port—each receive a share. The Dedicated receive one, and the commoners of Hammarsfjord and Quarry Town share the last.”

Aurn bent over the parchment, tongue tucked at the corner of her mouth as she wrote with care. Dora noted she used sheepskin reserved for formal contracts, its unique constitution making forgery nearly impossible.

She prepared copies for everyone named in the text. Then she drew out a yellowwood box, opened it, and revealed a seal—her new, personal mark, though Dora needed no explanation.

Aurn pressed the seal to each parchment, then passed the documents to Dora for her signature. She countersigned as witness before finishing each with a wax seal.

“I will deliver the original to the archive and forward the rest to their recipients.” The innocent child was gone; in her place stood the poised, sophisticated servant once more.

Her face crumpled into mischief again.

“We have to prepare you for the feast tonight.”

Dora had hoped Hugr might spare her the ordeal of a formal gathering, but fate was unkind. She was going, even if Aurndögg had to drag her there by the scruff of her neck.

“What about my parents?”

“Your family is being taken care of,” Aurn replied, crushing her last hope without mercy. Then Dora was swept away to be dressed, pampered, and prettified.

Dora sat in the seat of honour, to the Jarl’s right, beside Captain Vethrafn—who had arrived at her door precisely on time, impeccably attired in formal dress.

They were presented as Captain Sir Vethrafn and Her Excellency, the Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos. The introduction drew a tide of speculative gazes upon her—curiosity, envy, hostility, greed, and always the sharp edge of calculation.

She wore a fine grey xiton embroidered with silver, her hair bound in a modest scarf—elegant yet restrained beside the more lavish attire of others, save only the Jarl and his wife. Her parents sat further down the high table, joined by her brother and his wife, though the infant was absent.

The Jarl rose for the first toast, and all followed suit.

“Today we welcome the new lord of Port Keep—Her Excellency, the Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos—to our table. Welcome, and salute.”

He drank deep from his horn. Dora lifted the horn she shared with Vethrafn, tasting the mead—sweet, yet strong. Thus began the round of toasts, with Dora returning the Jarl’s honour in kind.

Relief filled her when the Jarl ordered: “Serve the first remove. “

Relief washed over her when the Jarl commanded, “Serve the first remove.”

High Servants entered bearing cheeses, broths, fish, and bread. Dora’s heart sank as she realized that, as lord of Port Keep, she too would be obliged to host such feasts.

Vethrafn gathered cheese, bread, fish, and broth onto their shared trencher of polished Dverg granite. Dora admired the gleaming stone set before them.

With her new belt knife she cut into a sharp cheese—its flavour as keen as its edge. Mama, predictably, chose broth, while the rest of her family followed Dora’s choice of cheese.

She ate slowly, mindful that three removes lay ahead, including the heavy meat course. The Jarl leaned toward her, his lean features softened. He spared not a glance for his daughter, who stood behind Dora, pouring drinks.

“One share of a spinel mine is a generous gift, Your Excellency.”

Dora sensed no malice in his manner.

“I only divided the spoils as Hugr directed, Your Grace.”

“Then I shall praise him on Form day,” he grinned, turning back to hear his wife’s words. Aurn’s mother had already scrutinized her daughter, studied her with a critical eye, then nodded and dismissed her presence.

The Head Elder, seated at the end of the High Table, dutifully raised his toast. He did not appear hostile—likely softened by the gift of a share in the spinel mine, which the Dedicated would now oversee under his administration.

The Jarl had filled the festhall—far grander than her own—with guests. Even the townsfolk received portions of the boars he and his knights had taken. Tonight, all of Hammarsfjord feasted.

In three days she would ride north with Vethrafn to seek the spinel mine. Quarry Town, famed for its miners, awaited them. She suspected they would spend the night there before gathering a mining party.

For now, her task was simple: endure the feast, eat sparingly, and avoid the speech. Easier said than done, though. People expected the word of Hugr, but she did not want to spoil the feast!

Siege

The sickle moon hung low as Dora stepped from her chambers to commune with Hugr on her beloved balcony, braving the cold. Far off, lanterns glimmered from the rigging of a galleon that had docked the day before.

She spared it little thought, her mind occupied with the quiet labour of preparing her household for her absence—a task that demanded more effort than she had expected.

That made her time with Hugr all the more precious. Softly she intoned the frame of communion, mindful of her parents resting in the chamber beside hers.

Her father now served both as captain of her watch and watch commander of Harbinger Street, having somehow persuaded the master to take over the post in due time.

The fact that Hugr had made her a lord—a peer of the Empire—still left her astonished. Such honour had come to her without effort; all she had done was die, and die horribly. How that suffering translated into lordship remained a mystery, though she trusted Hugr had prepared it with purpose. He never acted without reason, nor ever by halves.

The Ghost Breath enfolded her, tender as a mother's embrace. Today, Dora chose the Form of Persistence—a discipline she knew she would need in the days ahead.

Dawn broke over the sea as she traced the Form of Persistence, the waters shimmering in a glory of colours. The sight stirred her to worship Hugr. It was almost enough to lift her voice in hymn, though she held back for the sake of those still sleeping.

This morning their cavalcade would set forth to seek the mine. Hugr revealed the location once more, and she marked it carefully on a map before the Jarl, with Captain Vethrafn watching in silence.

Excitement mingled with unease as she considered the venture. Hugr had commanded that half the mine's yield be devoted to the war fund. The thought troubled her—why did that fund demand such vast wealth?

She knew war was stirring in the north, yet from the way Hugr spoke of it, the conflict might prove far greater than she feared. He had commanded her to find the raven—and she had obeyed. Now she stood not merely as his seeker, but as co-lord beside him.

Aurn slipped in quietly, bearing her morning porridge.

“You’ve been sitting out in the freezing cold again,” she scolded, her tone edged with exasperation.

Dora tried to maintain the dignity of a lord, but Aurn bundled her unceremoniously back into bed, setting the porridge on her lap. Arms akimbo, the little miscreant fixed her with a stern stare until Dora meekly began to eat.

She wondered who was truly lord and who was servant. Aurn ruled her chambers, and Bjorn, her High Servant, held sway over the keep.

Mama entered clad in a sturdy, practical xiton, her hemp-soled shoes firm against the floor. Her gaze fell on Dora with clear displeasure. Dora raised her spoon toward Aurn in self-defence.

“She was outside in the freezing cold again,” the little traitor blurted, letting the secret slip.

Anna’s green eyes hardened to flint.

“Stjarna Hammar,” she snapped, “remain inside until the sun is up—or so help me…”

Mama only used her birth name when angered. Dora instantly sensed that something more was at play than her eating in bed or braving the cold.

“What is going on?”

Anna let out a frustrated sigh.

“Your brother is being difficult again.”

Dora froze with her spoon halfway to her mouth, then set it back in the bowl.

“I’ll brain that stubborn ox, so help me,” she muttered, unconsciously echoing Anna. “He’ll get his whole family wiped out.”

“Your father is no help either,” Anna growled. “He keeps telling me he understands Leik’s position.”

Aurn rolled her eyes.

“Captain Vethrafn is the only one who can resolve this, Your Excellency.”

Anna and Dora fixed her with piercing green stares, but the fosterling remained unfazed.

“He’ll only dig in his heels if you try to force him. The Captain knows how to handle men,” she finished triumphantly.

Anna growled low in her throat yet offered no rebuttal. Dora, however, hesitated—she hated troubling the Captain with trifles. Still, her brother’s stubborn insistence on returning home could doom the entire family. In the end, survival outweighed pride.

Besides, if she meddled, he would only dig in his heels. He had been that way since childhood. Relinquishing control was never easy—especially when she held the power to lock him in the keep. Yet if she did, she would lose her brother as surely as she had already lost the younger one.

Aurn spoke the truth: Captain Vethrafn was the man to resolve this. Anna snorted in disgust when she read Dora’s answer in her face. She turned to her chest, sorting through her garments after sneering at the xiton Aurn had chosen earlier.

Aurn launched into a good-natured squabble with Anna over a suitable dress, while Dora quietly finished her breakfast. She would trust Hugr with Leik as well.

Aurndögg insisted on helping Dora dress, settling her into a warm grey xiton of sheep’s wool with subtle silver embroidery, hemp shoes, and woollen stockings layered over a silk chemise. The child delighted in tying the scarf over Dora’s ears, careful to conceal the pointed tips.

She was wrapped in a heavy cloak before being permitted to leave her chambers. Captain Vethrafn wore a war xiton of muted browns, his sword belted at his side. Instead of the helm she expected, he had chosen a simple cap.

Papa appeared in his usual watch livery. Together, the two of them cornered Leik, speaking to him with quiet insistence. Though Leik’s expression was mulish, he seemed to be listening. Dora closed her eyes, offering silent thanks to Hugr for this provision—between the pair of them, Leik’s goose was surely cooked.

Aurn escorted her to one of two heavy carriages: one reserved for her, and the other for the ladies-in-waiting she suddenly seemed to have acquired in abundance.

Aurn settled her onto the padded bench and tucked a blanket around her knees. Mama joined her, taking the opposite seat. Aurn sat beside Anna, the two of them sharing a blanket as their earlier squabble carried on in hushed tones.

Dora’s attention lingered on her sister-in-law’s worried face. Relief washed over her when the expression cleared—Leik’s goose was cooked, or so it seemed.

Vethrafn’s clear tenor rang out, calling the column into order: knights, men-at-arms, archers, harquebusiers, squires, servants, grooms, and more. A few rangers slipped past her carriage, moving with quiet precision like hunting cats.

A massive rider approached the carriage, his shaven head and boulder-like features lending him a fearsome presence. Dora judged his height at nearly seven feet—a towering block of power, or rather a lawful ogre, as the grey tinge of his skin revealed.

He leaned close to peer inside.

“I will serve as your personal guard on this excursion, Your Excellency. My name is Grot.”

Bronze scales covered his frame, and an open-faced helm of the same metal gleamed in the light which hung from his saddlebow. Yet Dora knew it was no ordinary bronze, but AN.NA—an alloy known only to lawful ogres.

“I thank you for your service, Sir Grot,” she ventured. He did not deny the title, and she guessed rightly at his knightly status.

The carriage jolted as the column set off. Leik watched with a heavy heart, his gloom a stark contrast to his wife’s look of relief. Anna waved, muttering under her breath, “At least someone finally knocked some sense into him.”

Dora returned the gesture silently. She dared not let Leik see her lips move—he might take offence and retreat to his house, where no one could shield them.

Her father had told her that more than fifty of Vethrafn’s elite soldiers guarded the Hammar family in secret when they slew that Draugr. Some even kept watch from within their kitchens at night. It was not the first time they had laid such ambushes.

As much as she hated being used as bait, at least the Draugr had been destroyed. Vethrafn sought her out to explain why he had risked her and her family.

“You mean another Harbinger told you to do this—or else dozens would have been slaughtered?”

He handed her a letter, sealed with a mark nearly identical to her own. Dora broke the seal and read:

To Dorothea Sophidamos, greetings.

Our mutual lord showed me two visions: in one, you are safe and the town dies; in the other, you face evil and the town survives. As one who has also returned, I knew what you would choose—though I suspect the blockheads will deny you the choice or keep you uninformed.

Your sister in Hugr

Farewell

She lowered the letter, fixing the blockhead with a piercing gaze. He didn’t so much as flinch when he declared:

“His Majesty ordered me to keep you in the dark.”

“Why?”

“He did not disclose that information.”

Dora’s fingers itched to hurl her shoe at him, but the Ghost Breath stirred in gentle reproof. She settled instead for a sharp click of her tongue, suspicion simmering, and let the matter rest.

She secreted the letter in a small lock-box after reading it again. Their wheel hit a rut jarring her back to the present. Outside, dew sparkled in the early morning sunlight as they trundled along the north road.

Aurn spent a long while leaning out the window, intent on reporting the column’s order of march.

“Knights in front, squires behind them,” she announced. “Then the footmen, we ladies-in-waiting, followed by the servants in carts, with more soldiers guarding the rear.”

The child practically bounced with excitement, leaving Dora feeling ancient—though she was only thirty, scarcely old enough to marry.

Aurn’s eyes swept the landscape, searching for the rangers. When she failed to spot them, her mouth tightened in disappointment.

“They are so good at hiding” she pouted.

Anna shared a smile with Dora about Aurndögg’s excitement. The child chattered constantly when she wasn’t hanging out of the window.

Anna exchanged a smile with Dora at Aurndögg’s bubbling excitement. The child chattered endlessly whenever she wasn’t leaning out the window.

The vision struck Dora unawares. Aurn had decided her new room required a fresh carpet.

“Only a grey horde will do,” she declared, arms planted firmly at her sides. Then she was back.

Aurn gaped at her, mouth open, while Mama’s expression flickered with unease.

“Sir Grok.”

“Here, Your Excellency.”

“Inform Captain Vethrafn that we are not alone upon the road.”

“As you command, Your Excellency.”

What did you see?” Aurn bubbled, while Sir Grok leaned over to confer with his squire.

“You are demanding a grey carpet for my room,” she teases Aurn.

“I was in your vision!” the child chirped, delighted, before wringing every detail from Dora—even insisting on what the vision smelled like.

Anna eventually calmed her with sweet baked goods.

“Trouble?”

“Unfortunately, Mama,” she admitted.

Aurn fixed her with a startlingly adult look, so at odds with the bulging cheeks of the child.

“A grey carpet covering the floor of that plain you call your chambers tells me things I devoutly hope are not true,” Anna concluded.

Outside, Sir Grok’s squire urged his horse into a trot. The ogre drew a wheel-lock pistol and calmly began to prime it.

“How many grey skins did you see, Your Excellency?” Grok asks.

“The carpet covered the floor of my chamber.”

Sir Grok studied the pistol with a frown.

“Two pistols won’t be enough,” he muttered.

Dora prayed they would reach the sturdy walls of Quarry Town long before they came within pistol range. Meanwhile, Aurn nearly burst with excitement at the unfolding drama, making Dora feel ancient—older than thirty.

Battle

Sir Grok primed his second pistol but left it unarmed. Even Dora knew the “carpet” lay some distance away. Along the line, horses trotted back-and-forth bearing messages.

The squire returned, handing his knight a note. Grok leaned toward the window.

“Rangers spotted dust to the north, Your Excellency.”

A thought stirred in Dora’s heart.

“Form the battle, Sir Grok,” she said softly, though her chest hammered with fear.

Grok turned to his squire, a boy of barely thirteen.

“Go!”

The lad spurred his horse into a gallop.

The carriage halted as soldiers formed ranks before them. Papa rode up.

“We face their vanguard, but the main body is still hours away,” he said.

Mama remained composed, while Aurn sat wide-eyed, like a mouse caught in the open. Papa fixed his gaze on Dora.

“Arm yourself only when the other women can see you. It will prevent panic.”

Then he was gone.

The driver steered off the road. Dora climbed down as servants unhitched the horses. Women spilled out in all directions, while men herded them into the square now forming from carts and carriages.

Dora stepped into the centre of the square and held her ground, waiting for the chaos to ebb. Gradually, the crowd stilled—some weeping, others pale with fear, a few standing firm with stoic resolve.

“Dóry,” she declared.

Gasps rippled through the throng as Hugr’s presence shimmered into view, a blue radiance hardening into a war xiton with half-armour, sword, and shield that coalesced around her.

With deliberate calm, Dora slid her sword into its sheath and slung her shield across her shoulder.

“Take shelter by the carts on the northern side,” she commanded. “Use the sides for cover.”

“Hugr be praised!” cried one maid in relief. “The Harbinger is with us!”

Dora was uncertain how much aid she could truly offer, yet her dóry broke the spell of panic. Women began pressing toward the wagons, clustering along the northern flank.

Mama waded into the crowd, shoving women into place with ruthless efficiency, while little Aurn trotted at her heels—snapping like a terrier, lending Anna the weight of her Jarlsdöttir’s authority. Slowly, order began to take shape from the chaos.

Soon the only sound was the tinkle of armour or a horse snorting.

“Attend me!” Dora called.

All eyes turned toward her as the male servants, armed with an assortment of weapons, moved swiftly into defensive positions.

“Today we will practise the Form of worship.”

She knew the sound of women’s voices would strengthen the men, embolden the women, and drive back the evil drawing near. Sir Grot and his squire stationed themselves behind her, ensuring she remained the focus of all attention.

Dora began the first Form, her pure soprano rising like a benediction. Soon the women—and even some men—joined, and she saw the men stand taller as the hymn washed over them.

She led them into the second hymn of worship when a savage shriek split the air. Cries of fear broke from the women, the hymn faltering into ragged silence. Yet Dora's soprano held steady. For a long moment hers was the only voice—until Aurndögg joined, then Anna, and at last the rest.

Their song rose as a counterpart to the savage chanting of the fell orcs before them. Then Dora felt the Ghost Breath weave power into the praise, filling men and women alike with strength to face death, battle, and terror.

The presence of the Ghost Breath was so powerful that none of the women flinched when the harquebusiers fired their first volley. Orcs shrieked in pain and fury as shot tore through their ranks.

Meanwhile, Dora led them into the third hymn of the Form of Worship. Arrows hissed from the orcs into the square of carts—one even landing close to her—yet none struck true.

A second volley from the orcs was interrupted when Vethrafn's second line of harquebusiers discharged their weapons. Then the Ghost Breath surged within her, granting sight: an orc shaman drawing upon the dark power of Ormr.

She read his intent—kill Vethrafn.

Dora chanted the frame of combat on Vethrafn's behalf. The Ghost Breath followed her words, settling upon him and cloaking his form in power.

Her vision stretched to the front line: orc warriors clashing against human and Dverg fighters. The orc shaman lingered in the heart of his war band, weaving his assault in secret. Arrows, spears, and sling stones cut the air as both sides exchanged volleys.

The first rank of harquebusiers levelled their loaded weapons at the advancing orcs. Dora heard her father's command ring out:

"Fire your weapons."

Flame and smoke erupted as the shots thundered into the enemy ranks. Two orcs collapsed lifelessly, while another staggered back clutching his wounded arm.

*The orcs kept up their dark chant to Ormr as the second volley tore into their ranks. One crumpled lifelessly, another dropped to one knee, snarling defiance.

Arrows hissed like angry bees, whipping back and forth between the two armies. Her heart clenched at the sight of still forms lying among their own battle lines.

Meanwhile, the orc shaman prepared to unleash his plan. Dora watched as he slipped through the ranks of his war band, macuahuitl in hand, the sun glinting off the continuous obsidian edge. Her father had taught her just how deadly those seemingly

primitive weapons were. That shimmering blade could shear flesh and bone in a single sweep.

Papa had explained that the orcs possessed techniques to preserve the fragile edges and deliver wounds of terrifying severity. The shaman's dark aura and murderous intent grated against the power of the Ghost Breath. Arrows still hissed across the open ground between the two lines, but even Dora could sense the orcs were moments away from charging. That was when the shaman would strike at Vethrafn.

The charge erupted suddenly, their chant rising to a crescendo of malice. A mass of warriors clad only in loincloths, feathers, and amulets surged forward, shields raised and macuahuitl poised to strike, crashing against the Human-Dverg line with primal fury.

The lines met in a thunderous clash of steel and stone as warriors fought desperately for the chance at a killing blow. The shaman, as Dora feared, singled out Vethrafn with his fury. He moved with primal speed and power far beyond the norm for his kind, yet even so he could not break through the Captain's guard.

Vethrafn held him at bay, though Dora could see the strain. Beside him, Papa battled a massive orc wielding a two-handed macuahuitl, his focus consumed by the brutal contest. The line buckled under the ferocity of the assault, but it did not break.

Then the Ghost Breath pulled Dora's gaze outward, toward the greater mass of the orc host half a day's march away. Her heart froze as she reckoned their numbers. The northern tribes had united—twelve thousand strong, divided into four bands: Cat, Deer, Bear, and Snake.

The war band hammering their line bore warriors from all four. The shaman himself was of the Bear, powerful and direct, unlike the serpentine cunning of the Snake shamans, whose treachery was legend.

Far more disturbing were the twenty Draugr marching alongside the commanders of the orc host—a devastating force in their own right. The Ghost Breath confirmed Quarry Town as the first target, with Hammarsfjord next to suffer. The very air grew foul as the orcs' chants invoked Ormr, making each breath a struggle.

The women singing the Form of worship were beginning to falter. Dora reluctantly tore herself from the battle to attend them. Beside her, Sir Grok stared fixedly at the line, every muscle taut with the desire to join the fight. Part of her longed to grant him leave, but she knew that would condemn him to the fate of the forsworn—the worst fate of all.

Raising her voice, Dora chanted the frame of blessing over the army, and the Ghost Breath answered. She often wondered why he required her to chant at all, when his power was limitless without her meagre aid. None of the Forms offered any explanation for this mystery between mortal and divine.

She left it as something to ponder after they first survived the battle. The frame of blessing counteracted the foul air brought about by Ormr's presence. The Form of worship soared into the air as the women found their voices again, urged by the Ghost Breath not to spare but to grind through.

Although she could not see the battle the din of it was unmistakable. The Ghost Breath seized her again to direct her attention to a flanking force that Captain Vethrafn anticipated and countered. A fierce hand-to-hand battle was being fought, but the line was about to break. She chanted the frame of blessing again and saw the Ghost Breath empower them to keep at it.

The shaman still pressed against Captain Vethrafn, while Papa seemed to have wounded his own opponent. Dora marvelled at the men's endurance—fighting so fiercely, so long, many of them weighed down by heavy armour. A thought stirred within her heart. She lowered herself to the ground and began chanting the fame of communion.

Hugr filled her with power and intent. When he released her, a long spear lay waiting at her side. Someone had to kill the shaman if they were to survive. Though Vethrafn held his ground against the bear-shaman, he could not break through his guard.

Dora seized the spear and turned to Sir Grok.

"We must kill their shaman, or we all perish."

"Agreed."

She chanted the frame of combat over him, then placed the weapon in his hands.

"Your sworn duty is to protect me. The only way to do that is to strike down the shaman. Go now, with Hugr's blessing."

She watched him stride into battle, his bulk a weapon as he forced his way past his comrades. Hugr shaped her vision so she could follow his advance until he reached Vethrafn's side.

The Captain fought skilfully against the bear shaman, holding his ground but unable to break through. At Dora's chant of the frame of holiness, Sir Grok lowered his spear.

He thrust—not at the shaman, but to his left. For a heartbeat it seemed the blow struck empty air, until a bear roared in agony. Dora smiled as the shaman's genii shrieked, its form exposed for all to see.

The shaman's face twisted in horror as his power slipped from his grasp. He flailed with his macuahuitl, but every strike fell uselessly. Vethrafn moved with calm precision and ran him through. The genii dissolved with a thin, fading scream.

Nearby orcs gaped in terror. One dropped his macuahuitl and fled, breaking the line. Panic spread like fire, and soon the entire war-band scattered, unable to withstand the dread of Hugr's presence now that the bear spirit was vanquished.

Men and Dverg stood gaping at the battlefield, astonished.

"I have never seen orcs break and flee like that before," Papa said, still in disbelief.

Sir Grok stared at the spear with awe—and more than a little trepidation.

"She gave it to me, and I just knew what to do," he croaked.

Vethrafn wiped his sword clean with a rag.

"Her Excellency just saved all of us."

No one gainsaid him, though Dora knew the true credit belonged to Hugr.

More than one face paled as the spear shimmered, then vanished. Even Sir Grok looked unsettled.

"Gather the wounded and prepare to leave at once," Vethrafn commanded. His words snapped the men out of their awe, and they hurried to obey.

Turning, Vethrafn strode back toward her, Sir Grok close behind. Hugr released her vision. When she came to, Aurndögg was grinning, ecstatic to have survived her first battle. But before she could speak, Vethrafn arrived.

His face was set in a grim smile.

"Which direction?"

"Quarry Town," she answered.

"Then it will be a siege, " he said.

Desperation

Dora sank deeper into the hot water, savouring the way the mineral-rich warmth eased her weary body. Earlier, they had loaded the wounded into carts and carriages, along with the four dead, before quick-marching to reach Quarry Town ahead of the horde.

The march had been brutal, testing them to their limits, but terror drove them onward until the stone walls of Quarry Town offered safety. By the time they arrived, Dora's body throbbed with pain. Some women had to be dragged along by equally exhausted men, while Aurndögg pressed forward through sheer grit, her face drained of all colour. Papa urged Mama onward, and Sir Grot's powerful, stoic presence compelled Dora to grit her teeth and bear the strain.

They reached Quarry Town ahead of the orc army—though only just. The town's women, upon seeing the weary caravan, wasted no time in ushering them toward the mineral baths, fed by hot springs deep within the mountains.

Dora no longer cared whether the enemy struck that very night. Her body felt as though it had been battered with sticks, not merely driven by relentless marching against the clock.

The subterranean baths, a gift from Hugr, embraced her like a living warmth. Steam curled through the cavern as she sank into the water, its heat cradling her aches away. Four great pools filled the women's section, each wide enough to welcome the entire caravan, a sanctuary carved from stone and blessed by the mountain's heart.

Dora sank until the water lapped at her chin. Aurn grinned, her face no longer pale with strain, and even Mama seemed content. The heat worked its magic, unwinding the knots in her body. Her stomach reminded her how long it had been since she last ate.

Caretakers watched closely, for some, lulled by the warmth, drifted into sleep and risked drowning. These were gently roused, wrapped in soft blankets, and carried off to bed.

In time, they drew Dora from the bath, dried her, and set before her a bowl of broth with fresh bread. Afterwards she was led to a dormitory, settled on a pallet, and surrendered to sleep before she could chant the frame of communion.

She woke in the early hours, already aware of the Ghost Breath's presence. A quiet thought stirred in her heart, and she rose, dressing swiftly.

Sir Grok leaned against the wall of the women's dormitory, looking rested and composed despite all that had transpired.

"They are coming," she said simply.

He straightened and followed her through the tunnels until the sharp, icy breath of dawn braced them both.

They were the only figures stirring in the town. Despite its drowsy peace, the Ghost Breath urged Dora onward, and she quickened her stride. Quarry Town had been carved from the old quarry—granite, slate, and tunnels now repurposed into a settlement.

The Dverg miners had fortified the quarry's mouth with wall, bastion, and bailey, the same gate they had passed through the day before. On either side, tunnels bored into the rock with concealed murder holes, their dark mouths covering every approach.

At the tunnel leading into the bailey, two Dverg warriors barred the way, halberds gleaming in the dim light.

“You may pass,” one told Sir Grok, his voice firm. “But no women are allowed beyond this point.”

Dora suppressed the urge to strike him. Starting an uproar by assaulting the guards would serve no purpose.

“This is Her Excellency, the Harbinger,” Sir Grok growled, his disgust plain.

The warriors exchanged a glance before the first replied, voice flat:

“No women are permitted on the battlements.”

Sir Grok surged forward, but Dora raised her hand to still him. Instead, she lowered herself cross-legged onto the cobbles and began chanting the frame of communion. At once, the Ghost Breath flooded her with his presence.

Though the shamans veiled their army from her sight, she sensed a dark mass advancing in stealth. Opening her eyes, she met the gaze of the two guards and knew they would deny her, no matter what she attempted. So she closed her eyes again and laid the burden before Hugr.

He opened her vision beyond the veil, revealing the dark power that had blinded the Dverg warriors. The assault had already begun, striking first at the eyes of the men on the battlements—even the guards beside her. Shifting her focus, Dora turned to the Form of worship and lifted the first hymn in a clear soprano. Her voice pierced the fog that smothered Quarry Town, and through her song Hugr moved, breaking the shroud that bound the people and warriors alike.

She felt the moment the fog broke, the shaman’s curse unravelling as their dark power scattered. A shout rose from the battlements as the warriors finally spotted the advance. Vethrafn’s clear tenor cut through the din, barking orders as the battle line formed. The two Dverg in front of her blinked in surprise, frowning like men just shaken awake—which, in truth, they had been.

Both scowled at her.

“Why’re you sitting on the ground like that, lass?”

“They can’t remember, Sir Grok,” she cut in, forestalling the lawful ogre.

Dora studied them a moment, then spoke steady:

“I am the Harbinger, Dorothea Sophidamos. You must let me pass to the battlements, or Quarry Town will fall before the morning’s done.”

One scratched at his short beard, glancing to the elder beside him.

“Might as well,” the older muttered. “Besides, yon fellow looks like he can guard her, no matter what them orcs throw our way.”

Dora rose, gave them the sigil of blessing, and slipped into the bailey. Dverg and humans were already forming ranks, squires arming knights, others hauling barrels of gunpowder. No one paid her any mind as she threaded her way through the chaos.

“Fire the falconet,” Vethrafn commanded.

She flinched at the sharp crack as the small cannon spat death into the enemy line. Sir Grok’s massive paw settled on her shoulder to steady her. Ahead, the stairwell to the battlements was jammed with men rushing to take their places. Grok used his bulk to shove through the press.

At the top, warriors lined the wall, but Dora’s destination lay elsewhere—Vethrafn’s command post on the bastion guarding the gate. As she made her way there, she glanced left over the wall, hoping to glimpse the enemy. No luck; the orc army cloaked itself in the shadows of early morning.

Something hissed through the air and shattered against the stone before her. An arrow. She ignored it. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Papa squinting down the barrel of a small cannon, trying to aim where he guessed the enemy hid. And there stood Vethrafn on the bastion, calm as the eye of a storm while chaos swirled around him.

She took position to Vethrafn’s left while Sir Grok planted himself before her, an immovable bulk of flesh. Vethrafn gave her a nod of acknowledgement, then turned back to wrangling order from the chaos of the sneak attack. Dora lifted her voice in the frame of blessing, and suddenly the warriors could pierce the cloak the shamans had cast.

A shout went up from the lawful line as they realized the enemy was already at the foot of the wall.

“Dory,” she sighed.

Her clothes shifted into a war xiton—leather boots on her feet, scale armour across her torso, an open-faced helmet on her brow. A sword hung at her side, a long spear in her grip, and a small shield strapped to her arm.

“Use this,” she said, handing Sir Grok the shield and spear.

He accepted the weapons just as enemy archers loosed arrows onto the battlements, trying to break the lawful line. Vethrafn ignored the shafts and calmly ordered:

“Harquebusiers, fire your weapons.”

Their line surged forward as the harquebusiers formed up. The commander barked the order, and the guns spat death into the enemy ranks. A howl rose from the orc line, the stench of burnt powder thickening the early morning air.

Ladders slammed against the battlements as orc warriors swarmed upward. Dverg and human met them with axe, spear, and sword, the line erupting into

close-quarters hewing. Dora's concern, though, lay with the shamans further back, their dark arts fuelling the assault.

She counted only Snake and Bear shamans—meaning the others were being held in reserve.

"Have the cannon fire on that line of shamans, Captain," she said evenly.

Vethrafn caught her words above the din, his tenor cutting through the chaos as he barked the order. Knights of his guard sprinted toward the cannon, fighting through the swirl of combat as orcs tried to seize the weapon. Dora's heart leapt into her throat when she spotted Papa holding the line against the flashing macuahuitl aimed at him.

The Ghost Breath surged within her, so strong it hurt. She lifted her voice in the frame of the arrow of holiness, and the chant shaped the weapon above her. A Bear shaman spotted it first and shouted to his fellows, rallying them to face the holy arrow.

They threw up a wall of power before them. Dora's lips curled into a mirthless smile as she levelled the arrow at the one who had seen it first. In battle, it was wise to strike down the strongest first. She waited for the Ghost Breath's command—then loosed.

The flaming arrow tore through the wall of power, smashed the Bear shaman's personal defences, and obliterated his spirit. His howl of agony carried all the way to the bastion, cutting through the din of battle.

Dora bent forward, breath ragged, while Sir Grok shielded her with the arms she had given him. One of the Snake shamans conjured an arrow of malice, its evil intent burning against her. He hurled it with all his strength. Grok saw it coming and caught it on his shield. The impact drove him to his knees, and from the way he cradled his arm, she knew it had been struck numb.

No ordinary human or Dverg could have parried that arrow of malice, even with the holy shield she had given him.

"I need that cannon to rake that line of shamans—right now."

Vethrafn didn't answer. Instead, he drew his sword and plunged into the melee around the cannon. Dora didn't need Hugr's whisper to know whichever side held the cannon would decide the battle this morning.

She counted four shamans in the enemy line, already charging another arrow of malice. Sir Grok saw it too. He staggered to his feet, stance unsteady. He couldn't take another strike like the last, but his oath pressed him forward. Sir Grok would try—and if need were, he would die.

The fight around the cannon swelled, drawing more warriors from both sides until the clash stretched the length of the battlements. Yet Vethrafn's presence lifted the lawful warriors' spirits, and they surged against the orc line with renewed fury.

The impact ripped through her body as the arrow struck, knocking them both down. Alive, intact—but she knew neither of them could withstand another. And there would be another, unless the cannon was won and turned against the shamans.

A roar of victory rose from the lawful line.

"She is fine, Snorri," Captain Vethrafn called. "She said to strike those shamans, or we will not survive."

Then he was there, cradling her weakened form in his powerful arms.

"Sir Grok?" she croaked.

"He is fine," he said, lips curling into a smile of encouragement. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She felt the steady beat of his heart as he held her close. It was almost too good to be held like that—but she did not mind. So she closed her eyes.

Her lips curved into a faint smile as the cannon spat death into the shamans' line. Then she happily surrendered to the darkness.

Victory

Dora woke to her mother's scowling face. Anna wasted no time before unleashing her fury.

"Consider yourself lucky, Stjarna Hammar, that you're laid out in bed like this—or I'd have taken a birth rod to your hide the moment you opened your eyes."

She seized Dora by the shoulders and gave her a sharp shake.

"What were you doing on the battlements?"

Aurndögg watched the exchange with unholy delight, her grin widening even when Dora shot her a murderous glare.

"Peace, Mistress. The keep would have fallen without her," Sir Grok interjected from the bed beside Dora.

Mama snorted her opinion but held her tongue, much to Aurndögg's evident disappointment. Dora tried to let her expression condemn the little ghoul's mischief, but Aurndögg only seemed more entertained.

Her body felt more battered than after the march—if such a thing were possible. Every muscle throbbed as though she'd been beaten with clubs, and Mama's shaking only made it worse.

"Those arrows of malice pack a punch," she groaned.

“Indeed, they do, Your Excellency,” Sir Grok replied fervently.

“Look at you,” Mama scolded again, her voice sharp but trembling at the edges. “You were laid out, pale as a ghost.” Her lips quivered. “I thought I’d lost you again.”

Guilt quickened inside Dora, and she reached for Anna’s hand.

“I’m sorry I frightened you.”

“Ah, she’s awake,” Papa said from the doorway, stepping in with Captain Vethrafn close behind.

The room suddenly felt crowded.

“We have Dedicated on the walls now,” Vethrafn explained. “A truce was agreed for to exchange the fallen. Their army remains camped outside, but they haven’t launched another assault yet.”

“It’s the next day?” She asked, startled.

“Indeed,” he confirmed. “You and Sir Grok have been out for a full day.”

Dora blinked. No wonder Mama was upset.

“What about the Draugr?”

Vethrafn’s expression darkened into a scowl. Papa’s face tightened with worry, while Mama wore a peculiar look. Aurndögg, true to form, only seemed entertained.

Some of the Dedicated are blessing weapons even now,” Vethrafn admitted.

Sir Grok shifted, making to rise from the bed.

“You will remain where you are, Sir,” Vethrafn commanded, his tone sharp.

The lawful ogre obeyed, though sullenly.

Dora hid a smile, yet she agreed with the Captain. Neither of them was fit to face shamans. For all his formidable strength, Sir Grok lacked the protection she carried from the Ghost Breath. He must be hurting badly.

The fact that he obeyed Vethrafn’s command told her all she needed to know. She turned to him.

“Please instruct the Dedicated not to face the shamans alone.”

“I already have,” he replied, his expression grim.

“We will keep them under watch at all times. Sir Grok’s squire will remain here to carry messages to me.”

A motherly-looking Dverg woman brought bread and bone broth, ending the conversation. Mama had to help her eat, much to Dora’s distress. Afterwards they

carried her to the garderobe for the necessary. Some sturdy Dverg men did the same for Sir Grok.

The activity left Dora utterly exhausted, and sleep claimed her once more. Hugr roused her in the early hours.

“They come,” he said.

Though she felt better, her body still ached.

“Sir Grot.”

“Your Excellency.”

“What is it?” Mama asked from her pallet at the foot of the bed. Aurndögg answered only with a faint snore.

“They come.”

Sir Grot reached to rouse his apprentice, who slept on a pallet beside him. It took some effort to wake the lad and explain the message. Then he was gone, leaving the rest awake in the dark.

Aurndögg muttered in her sleep, and the sound made Dora smile. She sat up carefully, mindful that her body still bore the wounds of her battles with the shamans.

Sir Grok followed with a grunt, and Mama steadied Dora, helping her sit upright.

“The Dedicated broke the fog of forgetfulness the shamans sent,” she reported. “That roused the warriors on the wall.”

“Thirty-nine men died in the last battle,” Mama said grimly. “We have nearly a hundred and fifty wounded.”

“They caught us off guard, Mistress,” Sir Grok admitted.

“I heard our men cut down about two hundred,” Anna added sharply. “And a certain brat who had no business being there killed a shaman.”

“The holy arrow shattered his bear spirit,” Dora conceded. “For a shaman, that’s as good as death.”

I want to break something else,” Anna muttered, her voice dark as iron.

Dora held her tongue. Mama was on the warpath, and this was no time for answers—only for cover.

The cannon spat death into the night.

“That stripped them of the illusion of safety,” Sir Grok observed.

Dora did not disagree. The Ghost Breath offered no urging, only silence, and so she remained seated, still as stone.

In theory, the Draugr held every advantage. They were powerful, hard to kill, faster than most, able to see in the dark—and utterly vicious. By rights, they should have swarmed the defences and torn open a breach for the orc horde. Yet the Ghost Breath held her quietly in its embrace.

Sir Grok's squire trotted back into the chamber.

"Captain Vethrafn bids me inform Your Excellency—someone appears to be striking the enemy from the rear."

The answer unfolded in her heart.

"Huldufólk," she said aloud.

"Are they friend or foe?" Anna asked, voicing the obvious.

"For now, friends," Dora replied.

"They despise orcs above all beings," Sir Grok affirmed.

The battle raged through the night until dawn stripped the fell host of its cover. Sir Grok's squire dashed ceaselessly between the battle line and their chamber, carrying word of the fight.

Dora was faintly amused by Aurndögg's soft snoring, yet she asked Anna to wake the child just before dawn. With a great yawn, Aurndögg sat up, blinking in confusion until the distant din of battle reached her ears.

"What—" she began, but Dora cut her off. "Go to the bailey, wait for the chief of the Huldufólk, and bring him to me."

She knew the battle still raged, but the little minx would probably find that thrilling. Dora exchanged a glance with Sir Grok, who beckoned his squire close and muttered instructions. At least the boy would keep the minx from slipping onto the battlements.

Hugr revealed how the Huldufólk had trapped a wedge of the orc army against the battlements. Dverg crossbowmen, human archers, and harquebusiers raked the mass with volleys that tore through shields and flesh.

The rest of the orc horde fought desperately to break their comrades free. The Huldufólk met them head-on, wielding macuahuitl like the orcs themselves. The clash was savage—close, personal, and brutal.

She saw the shamans form a line at the heart of the orc host, weaving arrows of malice. Her blood ran cold as the first arrow took shape. The Dedicated laboured to raise the Form of Defence.

The shamans loosed, and the arrow ripped the defence apart, shredding it into tatters before slamming into the Huldufólk ranks. Bodies were hurled skyward, blasted in every direction.

Vethrafn himself stood over the cannon. Dora watched as it thundered, hurling a ball into the shamans' line. The shot struck close, showering them with soil and clods, breaking their focus and halting the summoning of another arrow. The Huldufólk seized the moment, pressing the assault with renewed fury.

The trapped orcs seized on the gap torn open by the arrow of malice, driving their assault harder. A swirling melee erupted in the heart of the battlefield as they fought for escape.

They punched through the Huldufólk line, opening a breach that let sections of the orc host meet in the middle. In the bailey, a column of knights formed up, ready to sortie against the mass pressing the battlements.

Vethrafn passed command of the cannon back to Papa before running to join the charge. Even as steel rang and lines buckled, the shamans gathered again—shaping a fresh arrow, this one aimed straight at the gate.

Dora knew the battle had reached its fulcrum. If the shamans struck the gate, the charge would falter. A breach there would unleash the trapped host, letting them seize the bastion, silence the archers, and end the deadly fusillade tearing through their ranks.

The shamans could then hammer the Huldufólk line, widening the gap until the orcs poured through in force. If they managed it, the trapped warriors would break free—and the orc army would survive to fight another day.

But the cannon was still being reloaded, its thunder not yet ready to speak.

Dora had no time to shape a holy arrow before the malice flew. Instead, she framed a rain of light. It was too weak to kill, but the cascade unsettled the shamans, forcing a heartbeat's hesitation. That pause was enough—the cannon roared, hurling its shot into their line.

Bodies were flung aside as the arrow of malice unravelled. The Huldufólk seized the moment, driving forward to close the breach. Vethrafn and his knights thundered into the trapped orcs, lances piercing through flesh as the battlements shook with the clash.

The Huldufólk rallied, forcing their line shut with grim resolve. In the centre, the melee churned—macuahuitl against macuahuitl, bodies locked in brutal struggle. Captain Vethrafn and his knights drew blades and carved into the trapped orcs, pressing the assault with relentless fury.

Blades rose and fell in a grisly cadence, a dance of death that stained the ground. From the battlements, archers, crossbowmen, and harquebusiers poured fire into the press, cutting down those who tried to break free.

The shamans gathered again, reforming their line even as the cannon groaned through its reload. Dora, weakened and drained, knew her strength was spent—her role now was only to watch, to endure, and to pray that Hugr would take action.

An arrow of holiness took shape behind the Huldufólk's line, framed by their wise women—their Harbingers. They loosed it at the shamans, and it struck true, detonating in their midst and scattering bodies across the field.

The male Huldufólk pressed hard into the central melee, straining to split the orc host once more. The orcs, sensing the peril, fought back with savage ferocity.

The cannon thundered again, spitting doom into the shamans' ranks. The shot tore through them, adding to the chaos wrought by the holy arrow. More bodies were hurled skyward as iron and light cascaded through their line.

Vethrafn and his knights drove toward the centre, hemming the orcs against the battlements. The press of bodies left them no escape. In desperation, some hurled themselves at the walls, clawing for freedom from the maddening storm of arrows, quarrels, and bullets.

The Huldufólk surged forward, gaining ground even as the knights carved a path through the crush.

Another arrow of holiness struck the shamans' position, shattering their attempt to regroup. Even Dora—no soldier, no tactician—could see the tide had turned. The orcs were breaking.

The end came suddenly. One moment the orcs fought with snarling courage; the next, a warrior dropped his macuahuitl, cast aside his shield, and fled. Others followed, panic spreading like fire. The press of bodies surging to escape crushed the shamans' position, smothering any chance to rally.

In the centre, Vethrafn's knights and the Huldufólk closed ranks, cutting off the orcs pinned against the battlements from their main force.

The orc host broke. The main body routed from the field, while knights and Huldufólk took ruthless advantage, cutting down as many as they could in the chaos.

The slaughter raged until exhaustion dulled the warriors' pursuit. At the battlements, the rest of the lawful host pressed in with relentless weight, cutting down the trapped orcs with ruthless efficiency.

Realization dawned too late. The orc host drew into a circle, voices rising in the death chant. Despairing of survival, they set themselves to sell their lives dearly, kill as many foes as possible.

The battle was ended. The slaughter had only begun.

Aftermath

Aurndögg stepped into the room, trailed by a tall, broad-shouldered human clad only in a loincloth streaked with war paint. His black hair was bound in a warrior's club, his face marked by deep blue eyes set in strong, even features.

He lowered his macuahuitl onto the shield at his feet, then raised his hand in the high sigil. Dora answered in kind, completing the gesture with a frame of blessing.

"My battle name is *Yún tà shuǐ*," he said in flawless Imperial.

"My Harbinger name is Dorothea Sophidamos. My birth name is Stjarna Hammar," she replied.

He bowed with arms crossed. "I see Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos."

She returned the gesture. "I see *Yún tà shuǐ*."

One by one, he carried out the naming ritual with each according to rank—beginning with Anna, then Sir Grok, followed by Aurndögg, and finally Sir Grok's squire, Nikandros. His precision in following the hierarchy revealed that he knew exactly who everyone was. Dora even suspected he recognized Aurndögg's true identity. A dangerous man indeed.

The enemy we had trapped fought fiercely until the last of them fell. None accepted the offer of surrender," Yún tà shuǐ explained.

Dora understood more than his words. He was offering a diplomatic excuse for why he had not visited her sooner. She knew the Huldufólk's reverence for Harbingers, and recognized that he had wished to avoid offending her.

"I understand the difficulty of being a Zhànzhēng Qiúzhǎng," she agreed.

"I was sent to show you the location of the mine you seek, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos. I know you summoned me because you carry a message from our Lord Shengdi."

"Kneel Zhànzhēng Qiúzhǎng Yún tà shuǐ," she commanded.

Yún tà shuǐ obeyed her command. His eyes widened in sudden panic when she took a vial of oil from her mother—one she had asked Anna to prepare.

With steady hands, she poured the oil over his hair.

"Rise, Bàzūn," she said simply.

He rose with a grave face.

"I accept the choice of Shengdi," he declared, crossing his arms once more.

"I, Bàzūn Yún tà shuǐ, see Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos." Then, as before, he greeted each person with his new title.

“It has been long indeed since a Harbinger salved a Bàzūn to unite all the tribes of the Huldufólk,” he said.

A tall, willowy woman stepped into the room, bright feathers woven through her dark hair. She wore a knee-length xiton, moccasins upon her feet, and raised her hands to make the high sigil.

Crossing her arms, she spoke with calm authority.

“I see Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos. I am Huìzūn Fēngwǔ Lúzūn.”

Turning then to Yún tà shuǐ, she continued:

“I see Bàzūn Yún tà shuǐ. I am Huìzūn Fēngwǔ Lúzūn.”

With measured grace, she repeated her introduction according to the hierarchy, just as Bàzūn Yún tà shuǐ had done before her.

Vivid green eyes, accustomed to piercing the veil, locked onto Dora’s soul. Fēngwǔ Lúzūn did not judge her, yet her scrutiny weighed heavily, testing Dora’s mettle. Dora met the gaze unflinchingly. The Huìzūn was the closest presence to another Harbinger she had encountered since her return. Though the Huìzūn had not died and risen as she had, they carried a presence far stronger than the Dedicated she had seen falter in battle.

“Normally I would prepare a feast at once,” Fēngwǔ Lúzūn said, “but I see Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos still recovers from honourable wounds. Forgive me for deferring the celebration.”

“I, Dorothea Sophidamos, take no offence, Huìzūn Fēngwǔ Lúzūn.”

“Then the feast shall wait,” she declared.

The Bàzūn inclined his head before departing. “I will seek Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos another time, to speak of a future war party. For now, my warriors demand my presence.”

He departed after bestowing upon Dora the high sigil. Fēngwǔ Lúzūn knelt beside her bed and addressed Anna with quiet reverence:

“May I, mother of the Harbinger?”

Anna inclined her head.
“Go ahead.”

She took Dora’s pulse, then closed her eyes to ‘*see*.’ Aurndögg pressed closer, curiosity unrestrained, while Nikandros feigned indifference and failed miserably. Fēngwǔ Lúzūn opened her vivid eyes—akin to Dora’s emerald gaze yet distinct—and smiled.

“With your permission, mother of the Harbinger, I will prepare a decantation to restore Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos to health.”

Then she turned to Sir Grot.
“May I serve you, honourable warrior?”

“The honour is mine,” Sir Grot replied.

She took his pulse, too, before smiling.

“You possess a formidable constitution, honourable warrior. Most would have perished from such a grievous wound, yet you will recover swiftly—even without my aid. Still, I shall prepare a decantation for you as well.”

“The honour is mine, Huìzūn Fēngwǔ Lúzūn,” he replied smilingly.

It was the first time Dora had seen his stern face soften, and the sight startled her. For a moment, he seemed almost human—approachable. Fēngwǔ Lúzūn rose and traced the high sigil.

“I will return once the decantation is prepared. Peace be with you.”

Then she departed, as silently as she had come.

Dora lay back with a sigh. Her aches had aches. The shamans really did a number on her. Anna studied the rooms and looked at the excited Aurndögg.

“Let us eat lunch,” she said.

Aurn’s mouth turned down when she realized Anna meant for her to fetch the food. She went without protest, though her shoulders drooped a little. Nikandros joined her, which seemed to brighten the minx’s mood. Dora made a mental note to watch that budding relationship like a hawk—children were unpredictable, and one never knew what they might get up to next.

Papa stepped in, and Anna persuaded him to share lunch with them. He looked weary yet satisfied.

“They fought as orcs always do—until the end,” he announced. “We took nearly two hundred casualties to break them, but in the end, we prevailed.”

He sat heavily, and Anna fussed over him. To Dora’s surprise, he allowed it. Papa usually despised such attention. The battle must have drained him more than she had suspected.

“The rangers report the orc host scattered to the winds—thank Hugr,” Papa continued. “We won’t have to fight them again anytime soon, I hope.” He cast a sideways glance at Dora. She smiled, relieved he had come safely through the battle. Her vision had shown him deep in the fray.

“What became of the Draugr?” Dora asked.

Papa's mouth twisted in disgust. "They bolted the moment the Huldufólk joined the fight—cowards abandoning their allies. Their desertion let the Huldufólk drive a wedge straight through the orc host."

"Ormr must have known his army was finished the instant the Huldufólk appeared," Dora agreed. "So he withdrew his Draugr, saving them for another day."

Aurndögg and Nikandros entered carrying food. Dora's stomach rumbled as the scent of bone broth and fresh bread filled the room. Soon everyone gathered for lunch, though Mama had to help Dora sit upright.

The broth was divine, the bread chewy and fresh, the company exceptional—though she missed her elder brother, his wife, and their baby. Afterwards, Mama eased her back down, much to Papa's concern.

"I know you saved our bacon, Stjarna," he said, "but I truly wish you hadn't been on those battlements."

Anna's eyes hardened at the subject, much to Aurndögg's amusement. Nikandros shifted uneasily. Papa turned to Sir Grok.

"I thank you, sir, for protecting my treasure."

The shy smile Grok gave him startled Dora. It made her suspect he was young for his kind—like a youth receiving praise from an elder.

"I concur," Anna added.

Sir Grok straightened and bowed.
"I thank you for your grace, and for your trust in me."

Dora watched the commotion as her ladies-in-waiting bustled in with steaming water, poles, armfuls of cloths, and determined expressions. In no time they erected a barrier between her and Sir Grok, banished poor Nikandros from the chamber, and stripped her bare.

They scrubbed her with vigour while her protests went unheard—it felt less like washing and more like flaying. While one group nearly drowned her in their zeal, the others busied themselves refreshing her bed.

At last she was tucked in like a child, exhausted and chastened. Aurndögg, watching from a safe distance, did not bother to hide her grin at the spectacle.

It was then that Fēngwǔ Lúzūn reappeared, carrying the promised decantation.

Aurndögg sniffed at the bowl and pulled a face of disgust.

"I am glad I am not you," she said without mercy.

"Why are you unwounded while your mistress bears honourable battle scars?" Fēngwǔ Lúzūn's words pricked Aurndögg's bubble.

Aurn scrunched her nose.

“I was dragged away from the battlements by force,” she muttered, scowling at Nikandros, who had sneaked back in behind Fēngwǔ Lúzūn’s shoulder.

He flushed, but one lady-in-waiting spotted him before he could defend himself.

“Take this water and attend your knight,” she snapped, thrusting the still-hot basin into his hands.

He obeyed without hesitation as Fēngwǔ Lúzūn handed the decantation to Dora, who accepted it with visible reluctance. With a graceful motion, Fēngwǔ Lúzūn urged her to drink. Dora lifted the bowl and took a cautious sip of the vile brew—so foul her stomach revolted, leaving her gagging.

“Good medicine always tastes bitter, Your Excellency,” one of her ladies offered from a safe distance. Dora’s glare silenced her instantly. Anna took the bowl from Dora, sat firmly at her side, and commanded: “Drink.”

She pressed the bowl to Dora’s lips. The choice was stark—drink or drown. Dora swallowed.

It was hideous. Dora fought her gag reflex, nearly lost, then mastered it. Cold sweat beaded her brow.

A lady-in-waiting offered maltshade, which she drank gratefully. Fēngwǔ Lúzūn regarded her with quiet thoughtfulness.

“You will sleep once you’ve finished that. By tomorrow, you will be healed.”

“If one were to judge medicine by taste, this comes close to raising the dead,” Dora choked.

Aurndögg erupted in peals of laughter. Dora’s glare bounced harmlessly off her thick hide. Even Anna wore a smile as she eased Dora down to rest. Beyond the covering, water splashed as Nikandros helped Sir Grok to bathe.

Once settled, Dora cast a smouldering glare at Aurn, but sleep claimed her before she could voice her revenge.

The sun was already high when Dora stirred awake the next morning. She caught sight of Aurn clutching a feather, mischief dancing in her eyes.

“What are you plotting?” Dora asked.

“Nothing,” the child chirped, far too innocent.

Dora sat up, astonished to find she could manage it without help. To her surprise, both her parents were fast asleep on Sir Grok’s bed, while he and his squire were nowhere to be seen..

“That dreadful concoction actually worked,” she said in astonishment.

“Aye, that’s the bitter truth,” Aurn replied slyly.

Dora jabbed a finger at her.

“One of these days you’ll get what’s coming to you.”

Aurn only grinned wide, then her little face grew solemn.

“Captain Vethrafn said to tell you—they’ll bury the dead today.”

Aurn’s words twisted her stomach into knots.

“How many?”

“The combined forces lost three hundred and thirty-one dead and five hundred and ninety-one wounded. They counted two thousand and nine dead orcs on the field.”

Dora swung her feet to the side of the bed, but Aurn rose quickly and stopped her from climbing out.

“You’ll only be allowed to leave bed tomorrow.”

The Ghost Breath pressed against her gently when she tried to protest. She wanted to rise, dress, and pay her respects to the fallen. Sullenly, she subsided. It hurt to hear that so many had died.

A thought stirred within her heart.

“This is but the first tithe the Reaper has taken for the coming festival of young men. My Hugr will receive them and bless their loved ones to endure the unendurable.”

“That sounded like the Form of Prophecy,” Aurndögg said slowly.

“It was. Go to the funeral in my stead and speak these words to the dead.”

The Mine

Dora knelt in front of the burial mound alongside her parents, Aurndögg, and the ladies-in-waiting while one of the Dedicated delivered the Form of Lament. She insisted on a second service for those who could not attend the first one. A scattering of people used the opportunity to pay their last respects to the heroes.

The Lament concluded as everybody rose to sing the Form of Worship. Dora sensed the Ghost Breath move through the song touching mourners, comforting them. The prophecy she sent Aurndögg to deliver to Vethrafn and the Bàzūn burned in her heart. This was but the first fruits of the coming festival of young men—bitter fruits indeed.

While people mourned the sun shone brightly, out of pace with the solemn nature of proceedings. Dora took it as a promise instead. A promise that the war would end and the sun would shine over the world. Her heart warned, however, that that world would not in any wise resemble the current one.

The song ended the Form of Worship, and the Dedicated closed the Scroll of Forms. One by one, the small scattering of mourners began to drift away. Papa brushed the dust off his knees.

“We have a war council to attend,” he said.

“Aurndögg, see to my mother.”

The child pouted, her disappointment plain. Dora knew the little minx longed to attend the council, but she would not have the inquisitive girl overhearing secrets simply because being in the know thrilled her. To Aurndögg, all of this was still a grand adventure, despite the solemnity of the occasion.

Anna took Aurndögg firmly by the wrist and dragged her away. Dora’s gaze lingered on the ladies-in-waiting, weighing them.

“At least one of us should attend the council with you, Your Excellency,” said the eldest, a bright young woman with blonde hair and cornflower-blue eyes. Her tone was steady, almost commanding.

Dora sighed.
“One, then.”

The blonde girl’s smile dimpled.
“Eyrún Eirkr Stronghand, at your service, Your Excellency.”

“Please follow me, Lady Eyrún. The rest, please attend my mother.”

Dora turned to face Tent Town, sprawling before the battlements. It swarmed with Huldufólk—men, women, and countless children. The entire tribe had followed their warriors to battle: women tending the wounded, the Dedicated laying the fallen to rest, while elders and poets shaped new sagas from the day’s deeds.

n the distance, boys and girls tended sheep and cattle, playing as they kept a watchful eye on their charges, slings ready should any sly predator creep near.

For the most part, the Huldufólk lived in harmony with Quarry Town, trading often and quarrelling rarely across the centuries. Dora gathered that Tent Town had sprung up on the usual agreed ground, and she heard whispers of a mutual defence pact—especially against the threat of Orc assault.

Her grey xiton drew immediate notice the moment they crossed into Tent Town. Work halted, eyes turned, and awe rippled through the crowd. More than a few whispered behind their hands, while a herd of curious children clustered around, wide-eyed and eager.

The herd of little ones followed her—an adorable escort. As they walked, she studied the tents the Huldufólk called yurts. Each round dwelling was roughly thirty feet across, its domed roof supported by a wooden frame. Thick layers of felt formed the walls, with animal skins stretched over them to keep out rain and snow. She had read

about such structures before, but this was her first time seeing them in person—mobile homes sturdy enough to shelter families through every season of the year.

Her destination was the Bàzūn's yurt at the heart of the camp—both home and keep. At first glance, it looked no different from the dwellings of his folk, but the two warriors standing guard at the entrance marked it out. She halted before the doorway, and Eyrún spoke before she could:

"Her Excellency, the Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos, requests an audience with His Grace the Bàzūn."

"Enter, and be welcome," came the reply from within.

Yún tà shuǐ, newly acclaimed Bàzūn of all the Huldufólk, sat upon a chest draped in furs opposite the door. He gestured toward a low stool to his right, cushioned in bright colours—the seat of honour reserved for her. To his left sat the Master of Quarry Town, occupying the place of trust. Vethrafn was already settled beside the stool prepared for her, with another waiting for her father.

Fēngwǔ Lúzūn sat upon a similar chest at the Bàzūn's right hand—the seat of the wife. Dora blinked at the realization that Fēngwǔ Lúzūn was married to Yún tà shuǐ, though on reflection it seemed fitting.

"Welcome, esteemed guests and allies, to this Council," Yún tà shuǐ declared. "We gather to discuss the matter of the mine entrusted to you by our beloved lord Shengdi."

A round of ayes followed, voices rising in agreement.

The hearth at the centre of the yurt gave off a pleasant fragrance of fresh herbs—no doubt sprinkled there by Fēngwǔ Lúzūn and tended by one of her handmaids. Other than the young apprentice, they were the only attendants present within the yurt, lending the gathering an air of intimacy despite its weighty purpose.

"Heart-Trusted, I know that our beloved lord granted you this mine as a means to an end—one that will also benefit the Yǐn Rén, for we suffer daily from Ormr's plundering," Yún tà shuǐ said.

Dora knew that *Yǐn Rén* was the name the Huldufólk used for themselves in their own tongue, though all of them spoke Imperial fluently. Yún tà shuǐ paused, gathering his thoughts as his gaze swept the circle.

"We will first consider how this gift might serve the Yǐn Rén and our allies."

A thought stirred in Dora's heart.

"One in ten from my share shall be given to the Yǐn Rén as rightful compensation," she declared. "In addition, Hugr has shown me a hidden high valley near the mine, within your territory, rich with grass, water, and moss—a place unknown to you."

Both Fēngwǔ Lúzūn and Yún tà shuǐ leaned forward, far more intrigued by her description of the valley than by the offer of a tithe from the spinel mine. She was not surprised. They were a pastoral people who followed their herds with the seasons, and new grazing grounds were treasures beyond measure.

Yún tà shuǐ crossed his arms over his heart.

“The Léi Quán Shìzú sept of the Yǐn Rén accepts this gift with gratitude.”

That gesture sealed the negotiations. Dora knew the next matter would be the expedition to the mine—an undertaking far larger than she had first imagined. It now embraced Hammarsfjord, Quarry Town, and the Léi Quán Shìzú sept of the Huldufólk. She marvelled at how effortlessly Hugr had forged an alliance, using nothing more than the simple tool of mutual need.

Guild-master Rykhammar Stenmark joined the discussion for the first time. Dora had met him briefly the day before, when he introduced himself and his wife, Gerda Duftsdóttir. Quiet and competent, with an air of authority, his features were like the stone he mined—hardened by labour yet softened by deep humanity. He spoke slowly, deliberately:

“I will allocate one hundred miners to the expedition and send two hundred warriors to guard the mine. In addition, my wife will accompany them to oversee the support folk.”

“We will leave our wounded at Quarry Town and proceed as planned,” Vethrafn added, breaking his silence. He smiled at Dora.

“I secede Sir Grok to your service, as per his request.” His grin turned roguish, his eyes twinkling, and Dora’s heart skipped. “Your Excellency seems to have made a conquest.”

It took all her composure to keep her face straight and not blush. She nearly faltered when Papa grinned at her. Unable to refuse gracefully, she simply said:

“Thank you, Captain. I accept his service.”

With the negotiations complete, Fēngwǔ Lúzūn clapped her hands. Maidens entered bearing food. One, a pretty child with beads woven into her hair, brought Dora a horn of mead. Dora accepted it, lifted the horn toward heaven, and intoned:

“May Hugr bless the bounty of the earth to nourish us.”

She drank. More horns of mead were passed among the guests, who followed her example. It was prized dry mead, sharp yet fragrant, carrying a hint of the summer in which it had been brewed.

Soon more maidens arrived with platters of flatbread drizzled with honey. Dora received it with gratitude, broke bread, and ate. She knew the courses to follow:

choice cuts of meat, then skyr crowned with dried berries — the full measure of hospitality.

Much to her surprise, Tent Town dissolved the very next day, its people streaming after the mine expedition. Dora once again rode in her carriage, now absorbed into a sprawling column of oxen, mules, packhorses, donkeys, lumbering carts, and swarms of folk on foot or horseback, while children chivvied herds of sheep and cattle along the road.

At first it seemed a glorious chaos, but soon she discerned a hidden order. Warriors clustered around her carriage in a shifting guard, some pausing to exchange words with Sir Grok before peeling away to trot ahead into the distance.

Captain Vethrafn had passed by earlier to exchange a few words with her before trotting ahead, knights in half-armour following in his wake. A sturdy Dverg woman, Gerda, wife of the Guild-Master, had driven her cart of victuals closer to share a brief chat with Anna.

Even Eyrún had walked alongside the carriage for a time, speaking with her. Fēngwǔ Lúzūn and Yún tà shuǐ also paused to converse before hurrying forward to take point, for they recognized the place she had described from her vision.

“It is five stages away,” Yún tà shuǐ told the council. She understood it to mean five days’ journey.

Thus the journey unfolded at a leisurely pace. From time-to-time Dora stepped down from her carriage to walk among the people, answer questions, accept gifts, and bestow blessings. Aurndögg trailed behind in a sulk, still nursing her resentment at being forbidden from attending the council.

By late afternoon the sept halted to make camp. A group of maidens, aided by a few warriors, raised a yurt for her—one she learned was now hers alone, kept by the sept for her exclusive use. They furnished it richly with rugs and furs, a copper kettle for cooking, and even weapons to hang upon the walls.

Later, Dora sat in her seat surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, the maidens, Sir Grok and his squire, several warriors now sworn to her service, and her parents, with Gerda among them. Somehow, Gerda had managed to stew a pot of pottage along the way.

“It is only a simple pottage,” she explained to Anna, “with the usual base of barley and dried beans. I added cabbage, a few carrots, some late greens, herbs, and salted pork for flavour. It simmered all day on the portable hearthstone my husband made for me.”

It tasted like pottage too—hearty and filling—served with flatbread and mutton chops and washed down with maltshade. Her people surrounded her on all sides when they climbed into bed.

She woke before dawn to spend time with Hugr, alone beneath the stars—or at least pretending to ignore Sir Grok and the two warriors who lingered at a discreet distance. They followed her everywhere, even to the garderobe, though they granted her privacy to see to her needs.

She marked each stage of the slow, unhurried journey, savouring the beauty of the land, the warmth of its people, and above all the peace—precious peace, for she knew it could not endure.

Time drifted by in a golden haze of simple pleasures, free of burden or demand. But on the dawn of the fifth day, the spell broke. Scouts came racing back, breathless and alarmed.

“To arms!” they cried. “Ware Jùrén ahead!”

New Enemies

Warriors rushed to their predetermined stations in the marching order, while the rest sought shelter away from the looming battle lines. Dora sat quietly inside her carriage, waiting.

Hugr had given no warning of this encounter. He must have his reasons, she told herself, and she refused to panic.

“What are Jùrén?” Aurndögg asked, her voice bright with curiosity. She practically bounced with excitement, unable to contain herself.

Anna reached out and seized Aurn firmly by the ear.

“Ow—let go!”

“You will remain here beside me the whole time, or so help me,” she growled.

Aurndögg wrenched her ear free and sat rubbing it resentfully. Yet before long, her excitement bubbled back to the surface.

A thought stirred in her heart.

“Sir Grok,” she called.

He leaned closer to the window.

“You summoned me, Your Excellency.”

“Send the message: there will be no battle today.”

He turned to his squire.

“Go, lad.”

Nikandros spurred his horse into a canter. Dora watched him ride away, hiding her smile at Aurndögg’s crestfallen look when she realized the clash was not imminent.

“The Jùrén are giants,” she said.

Aurndögg’s pout dissolved, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Are they truly as tall as towers?”

Dora leaned over, brushing away a stray curl.

“No, silly,” she smiled. “They’re about as tall as Sir Grok—some even taller—but broad, muscular, and immensely strong. Picture someone as tall as Sir Grok, but half again as wide.”

Her eyes widened as her imagination took flight. In Aurndögg’s strange blend of weary cynicism and unspoiled innocence, Dora felt an almost irresistible urge to gather her close, as though she could swallow up that paradoxical charm whole.

At the same time, her imagination kept the little minx out of trouble — a welcome bonus. That is, until the next time she chased a butterfly straight down a rabbit hole.

Who could say what ogre might lurk at the bottom? Aurndögg feared nothing, though she was far too sensible for her years, it did not preclude a headlong flight into danger while chasing her butterfly.

She regarded Dora with a quizzical look.

“Why will they refuse to give battle?”

“There are only five of them — too few to challenge us, yet too many to strike down without heavy losses.”

“It would still be five fewer enemies,” she said practically.

“True, the Jùrén are our foes. But that doesn’t mean we must fight them. We might still avoid conflict — yet if we kill their kin, war becomes inevitable.”

That seemed to placate the minx—for now. Dora knew the Huldufólk would see it the same way, while Vethrafn, scarred by his losses in the recent war with the Orcs, would avoid battle if he could.

Gerda brought bottles of maltshade while they waited for the standoff to resolve. Dora sipped slowly as Gerda chatted with Anna and Aurndögg. Then Vethrafn trotted up to her carriage.

He greeted them with the high sigil.

“Battle today or battle tomorrow?” he sighed.

“Battle tomorrow, without question,” Dora replied.

“Agreed.”

He shifted in his saddle.

“They seem to be heading the same way we are.”

The thought lingered while she weighed its implications.

“They’re after the marble where spinel forms,” she said slowly. “That will become a problem, since the Jùrén build their cities from marble.”

“Aye,” he sighed. “Battle tomorrow.”

Gerda handed maltshade to him, to Sir Grok, and to Nikandros when he trotted up. They drank deep, grateful for the drink.

“We’d better fortify that mine,” Vethrafn said grimly. “Garrison it with men, cannon, shot, and powder if we mean to hold it.”

“Stock enough food as well,” Gerda added, her voice steady as iron.

“Yún tà shuǐ agreed we should hasten our pace. Better to arrive early than late,” Vethrafn said.

He passed the empty leather bottle back to Gerda, then raised the high sigil in parting.

“See you all at the mine. Fortune smiles—had the Jùrén discerned our true destination, we would already be locked in battle.”

With that, he spurred his horse and trotted off.

“If the Jùrén were lawful instead of fell, we might have reached an accord to share,” Dora sighed.

“It would still be to their advantage to share, even as fell folk. So why don’t they?” Aurndögg pressed.

“Their allegiance to Ormr forbids agreement with Hugr’s followers. And besides—” Dora’s voice hardened, “they are cannibals.”

She paused, studying Aurn closely.

“I mislike that gleam in your eye, miss.”

Aurndögg tried to compose herself, chin tucked and lashes lowered, but the effort was laughable. Her eyes sparkled with mischief, curiosity burning too brightly to be hidden. Dora’s stomach tightened. The child was far too capable of offering herself up to the Jùrén—half in jest, half in experiment—just to test whether Dora’s words rang true.

And of course, she would expect Dora to swoop in at the last moment, to snatch her from the jaws of danger as if it were all a game.

Dora’s gaze lingered, heavy with foreboding. The future stretched before her like a battlefield, and she feared this reckless spark might one day ignite a fire she could not quench.

“‘I believe you’ll give me grey hairs long before my time,” Dora sighed.

Anna snorted. Dora chose to remain dignified, ignoring her mother's barbed remark. She had not been such a troublesome child—surely Anna exaggerated.

Besides, had not Papa always called her his treasure?

Aurndögg's eyes glittered with suppressed mirth. Dora refused to dignify the little brat with a reaction—too clever by half, and far too pleased with herself. Gerda's quick grin betrayed her complicity, and Dora forced her own features into a mask of neutrality.

Yet somewhere beyond the veil, she felt Hugr's laughter echoing faintly, as though even he joined in the jest.

It was intolerable. Everyone seemed ganged up against her.

Sir Grok rescued her, as any gentleman would.

"We seem to be nearing our destination, Your Excellency," he said.

The words broke the spell. Everyone crowded toward the window, eager for a glimpse. At first, Dora saw only more mountains—grey silhouettes upon grey—but then she realized these were different. They faced the range they had been following for five days, always keeping it to their right.

White and grey stone stretched across the slopes, streaked with grass and shrubs. Here and there, patches of colour glimmered—red, orange, purple, and other hues—so vivid and plentiful that Dora was astonished no one had noticed them before.

Dora climbed down to stretch her legs, the camp routine unfolding around her as she wandered closer to the mine.

Gerda ran her hand across the pale surface. "Good stone," she approved.

Aurndögg tilted her head. "Is this marble?"

Anna crouched beside the rock, tracing its veins with a fingertip. "The spinel forms inside the marble," she explained.

Aurndögg's eyes widened, her curiosity shimmering with that odd mixture of wonder and misapplied words. She studied the stone as though it might whisper secrets back.

"Can you use the marble too?" Aurndögg asked, her voice bright with curiosity.

"Of course you can," Gerda replied without hesitation.

Dora lingered, eyes tracing the contours of the mine. It unsettled her—such a rich vein should have been uncovered long ago. Why had it remained hidden until now?

Fēngwǔ Lúzūn strode past a half-raised yurt, her expression grave.

"This ground is claimed by the Tàiyáng Shàobīng—the Sun Sentinels," she said. "We will have to reckon with them soon."

“Beast kin,” Gerda said tightly.

Aurndögg’s mouth rounded in an “oh” of surprise before her cornflower eyes flared with incandescent curiosity. Anna rolled her eyes in weary despair, and Dora caught the child’s wrist to keep her from bolting in search of Beast kin.

“Can I pet them?” she begged.

“Not unless you want to lose your hand,” Fēngwǔ Lúzūn replied with a sly grin.

Dora caught the rigid set of Gerda’s shoulders at the mention of the Sun Sentinels. That stiffness was a warning—future negotiations would falter if Quarry Town’s folk shared her unease.

Then Vethrafn stepped into view, and Dora’s heart stuttered. She forced herself to look away, refusing to probe the emotions that threatened to rise.

“We will have to negotiate with them,” he said, revealing he had overheard the exchange before stepping into view.

“Excuse me, my pottage needs checking,” Gerda murmured, fleeing the moment.

Vethrafn’s eyes tracked her departure.

“That could be a problem.”

Dora silently agreed, but she had no desire to pursue the matter just yet.

“They’ve been scouting us for the past three days,” Vethrafn continued, his voice low, “or so my rangers tell me. Yet they’ve made no move to approach.”

Let me go sit in the open!” Aurndögg burst out.

Over my dead—”

Dora stopped, a word forming in her heart.

“Yes… you will do exactly that,” she said, startling even herself leaving Aurndögg wriggling in excitement and anticipation.

‘You will sit quietly and wait,” she sternly warned the excited child. “The Tàiyáng Shàobīng will approach when they choose.”

“I will be as quiet as a mouse,” Aurn promised.

The adults exchanged knowing grins above her head, aware it was a promise she could never keep.

They followed her beyond the camp where the others had departed. Dora knelt beside Aurn, offering final instructions.

“Do not show your teeth. And do not make sudden movements.”

Then she left the girl alone, departing to a quiet place to pray. Aurn needed all the help she could get. Dora slipped into the vision as her prayer deepened, and suddenly she saw…

Aurn sat quietly on the ground, idly twining strands of her blonde hair, while a small creature peered at her from the tall grass a few feet away. It wore skin clothes and carried throwing spears, with an atlatl poised to launch them.

Dora counted five darts; each tipped with vicious obsidian points. Curiosity drew her closer—she had never seen the Tàiyáng Shàobīng before. The being was small, barely four feet tall, with a slender frame and a mane of grey fur striped like a tabby cat.

Its face was fine-boned, but the eyes—oh, the eyes—were striped like a cat's. Its ears, pointed like hers, ended in tufts of fur and twitched with life unlike her fixed ones. On its feet were moccasins; its breech-clout, leggings, and deerskin shirt gave it a wild grace. Across its brow lay a headband strung with colourful beads.

The Ghost Breath whispered their meaning: the beads spoke of status, prowess, lineage, and history, woven into a complex ritual language.

Tine nostrils flared as he sniffed the air, eyes fixed warily on the camp—especially the warriors. The dart it held was aimed at Aurn, though more as a precaution than threat. It carried the air of a small animal edging toward a larger one—cautious, yet curious.

It eased slightly when Aurn did nothing more than play with her hair, offering no movement that could be taken as a danger.

The Tàiyáng Shàobīng rose suddenly, startling Aurn, who wisely held herself still. It stood poised, head lifted in the classical stance that had earned the Sun Sentinels their name, atlatl raised and ready to cast its dart.

Dora's heart leapt into her throat, but the Ghost Breath brushed against her gently, calming her.

"Wing fà lom sees the Dverg maiden," it said in broken Imperial.

Aurndögg lifted the high sigil to the Sun Sentinel.

"I am the Dverg maiden Aurndögg."

"You wear the holy colours, Dverg maiden Aurndögg."

Its small face tightened as it waited for her reply.

Aurndögg smiled softly, lips closed.

"I have the privilege of serving the Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos."

"Wing fà lom knows you speak true. One can sense Her Holiness watching as we speak." He nodded. "It is as it should be."

Surprise filled Dora as she heard Wing fà lom's voice right next to her ear.

New Friends

Wing fà lom settled cross-legged before Aurndögg, his atlatl and dart resting ready in his lap, yet held without threat.

"I have been sent to find the Holy Maiden—the one with ears like ours."

Aurndögg's grin turned mischievous.

"She does indeed possess pointed ears."

The Ghost Breath revealed to Dora the truth in Wing fà lom's words—he had indeed come for her, just as he claimed.

"Go," the Ghost Breath whispered into her heart.

The vision faded, leaving Dora alone, though she knew Hugr would remain with her until the world's end. She set off at a slow, steady pace, waved her women aside when they moved to follow, and walked toward Aurndögg, who sat with her guest.

In the distance, she saw Aurndögg seated before the tiny Sun Sentinel. Awareness surged through her as she passed the hidden warriors—Vethrafn and his crew.

"Please follow me, Captain," she called.

Sir Grok stepped aside to let Captain Vethrafn pass, then took up a position from which he could watch the proceedings.

Vethrafn was cat quiet behind her as she stepped closer to the pair waiting for her.

Wing fà lom laid his weapons upon the ground as they approached, awkwardly shaping the high sigil. Dora halted a few paces away.

"Bid your companion reveal herself. Kîao Wing fà lom—open your heart."

The alien eyes widened in awe. He pressed his right fist to his chest and bowed.

"I behold Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos."

I see Kîao Wing fà lom," she replied softly.

He bowed once more, hand pressed firmly over his heart, then spoke in his native tongue—words rippling from his lips like water over stone.

From the earth a few feet away, a tiny figure emerged: a perfect miniature of Kîao Wing fà lom. She was armed identically: a short blade hanging at her belt, her stance mirroring the original with uncanny precision.

Dora's voice rang clear:

"I see Mae Nira Yaa Lai."

Nira Yaa Lai's eyes widened at the sound of her name. She set her atlatl and darts upon the ground, then pressed her fist to her heart.

"I see Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos."

Dora intoned the ritual words:

"I offer you hearth, food, and water."

She sat, and Vethrafn followed, raising the high sigil.

"I see Kîao Wing Fà Lom and Mae Nira Yaa Lai. I am Captain Vethrafn."

Wing Fà Lom replied in kind:

"I see Kîao Vethrafn."

Nira Yaa Lai greeted him with the same solemn gesture.

Aurndögg, please prepare meat, bread, clean water, and sweet fruit for us," Dora said.

The child's eyes glittered with glee as she rose to obey.

They sat in a circle, speaking lightly of the weather and the recent battle with the Orcs—both clearly had firsthand knowledge—yet each carefully skirted the true subject: the mine.

After a time Aurndögg returned, laying out mutton, bread, leather bottles of water, and fruit upon a cloth spread neatly on the ground. Her gesture prompted Wing Fà Lom to set aside his darts. Dora's gaze lingered on them, surprised to see that the tips were not knapped from obsidian glass as she had assumed, but fashioned from another substance—cast, it seemed, like bronze.

Dora took a mutton chop, murmured grace, and began to eat. The two Sun Sentinels helped themselves, savouring the meal with evident delight. Dora gestured for Vethrafn and Aurndögg to join the feast.

At last, the Sentinels leaned back, belching in satisfaction, their small frames astonishingly capable of consuming so much. Dora released a polite belch, which made Aurndögg grin. At Dora's sharp glare, she reluctantly echoed the gesture. Vethrafn followed suit, completing the ritual of shared indulgence.

"Did Jàk-grà-phát give you a word, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos, " Wing Fà Lom asked.

"The Serpent will spew venom across the land, drawing all that was fell into his coil. The Raven Prince will marshal the lawful armies—but even he required eyes. "

At that word, the two Sun Sentinels flinched. Wing Fà Lom shifted uneasily.

"Dverg folk take us for fell because of our eyes," he murmured.

Gerda's unease suddenly made sense. Dora herself found the catlike slits unsettling, yet she felt no shadow of corruption in the Sun Sentinels—only a strange, luminous watchfulness.

Your eyes are the gift Jàk-grà-phát, the one we call Hugr, " Dora said firmly. "Do you have the power to Covenant or do you need to report?"

"We have to report, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos, " Wing Fà Lom answered.

"If you serve, the Tàiyáng Shàobīng will be entered into the roster of lawful nations," Dora promised.

Their eyes widened.

"That would be a precious gift," Wing Fà Lom said slowly.

He rose, bowed with fist over heart, then traced the high sigil for good measure. Nira Yaa Lai followed suit.

"Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos, Kîao Vethrafn, Dverg-maiden Aurndögg."

They gathered their weapons and jogged away. Before long, they had vanished into the dusk.

"Their night-sight would be of incredible value," Vethrafn remarked, then grinned. "But tell me—what is this I hear about a Raven Prince?"

When her flat stare bounced off his thick hide, Dora shifted tactics, feigning ignorance. Vethrafn chuckled, while Aurndögg's eyes glittered with mischief. Dora flicked the child's forehead with a finger.

"Ow!" Aurndögg cried dramatically, clutching her brow, though her grin betrayed her delight. Dora wagged her forefinger beneath her nose.

"One of these days," she warned, "one of these days you'll see."

Aurndögg answered with peals of laughter, then darted away like a mischievous sprite as Dora lunged to catch her.

You'll never catch her," Vethrafn predicted.

And so it proved: Dora collapsed, panting on the ground after the hard chase, while Aurndögg hid triumphantly behind Vethrafn's broad back, far too pleased with herself.

As Dora sat down, the sun dipped in a blaze of colour—yellows, oranges, and reds painting the sky. Hugr's peace settled over her, enfolding the moment she shared with Vethrafn and Aurndögg.

Come home before it's dark," Anna called, spoiling the moment.

Gerda stood beside her, ladle in hand, ready for battle.

“We’d better go before they drag us by the ears,” Dora muttered.

Aurndögg clapped her hands over her ears, casting worried glances at the two elders. Dora hid a grin as Vethrafn escorted them both. The instant they arrived, Gerda seized command, hustling them toward a lone yurt—smaller than most, yet unmistakably theirs.

“We set up the sauna for you,” Gerda explained as she led the way.

Dora quickened her pace at the mention. Papa had built one for their house—something Mama had insisted on when they married. It never matched the soothing embrace of hot springs, but it was the next best thing.

“They found a strong fountain set back in the cliff face,” Gerda explained as she led them onward.

Dora tugged self-consciously at her xiton, still unsettled by the way her ladies had descended upon her earlier. They had dressed her over her protests, much to her mother’s amusement. Gerda only shook her head at the entire scene.

They dragged her to the feast, where she was expected to eat despite already being uncomfortably full. Seated in the place of honour, a horn of mead pressed into her hand, she dreaded the courses she could smell roasting outside.

Vethrafn did not help matters, subjecting her to sly, knowing winks. She wondered what scheme he was plotting, for surely he must be as stuffed as she was.

The yurt buzzed with loud, animated chatter. Yún tà shuǐ had invited all the knights, their squires, and the officers, so his pavilion was crowded with guests. The rest were served generous portions from the fires outside, where hearty stews simmered.

Music clamoured for attention, competing with voices raised in laughter and shouts. Her ladies-in-waiting, along with Aurndögg, had been invited too. When they protested that their duty was to serve her, Fēngwǔ Lúzūn silenced them firmly, declaring they were guests, and that she herself would see to Dora’s needs.

She sat in the place of honour, sipping fine mead she did not want, dreading the food she would be obliged to eat, while the surrounding din pressed in from all sides.

Young maidens in bright, colourful dresses swept into the yurt. To the beat of tambourines, drums, and flutes, they launched into a vigorous dance, the music weaving and clashing with the uproar outside. To Dora’s mind, even battle had been quieter.

They brought in the first course, offering Dora only small portions. She thanked Hugr for Fēngwǔ Lúzūn’s discreet kindness. Her hostess knew she had feasted earlier and could not honour the banquet without risking offence.

So Fēngwǔ Lúzūn ensured she received portions she could manage. When the raucous dance ended, Yún tà shuǐ called for horns of mead to be passed among the maidens, to their delight.

The feast carried on until Dora realized it was meant to last until dawn—a mingling of victory and mourning. In time, she was swept into the revelry, finding herself in a circle dance with Vethrafn.

His eyes glittered in the firelight as he gave himself over to the rhythm, his abandon urging her to shed her own long-held tensions. Papa and Mama lay together on a rug amid the merriment, snoozing peacefully while dancers stepped carefully around them. Dora envied their rest yet knew she was expected to stand at the dawn ceremony.

Earlier, Fēngwǔ Lúzūn had drawn her aside to explain what was expected: the Huldufólk looked to her to command the dawn ceremony. In the still hours before sunrise, Dora slipped into the dark seeking solace, to commune with Hugr.

Yún tà shuǐ noticed her and followed. Dora was about to excuse herself when the Ghost Breath held her fast.

“You have seen my macuahuitl,” he said, shattering her expectations. Of all the subjects he might have chosen, that weapon was the last she anticipated.

Indeed, she had seen it—a two-handed blade of wood set with a continuous, razor-sharp edge of obsidian glass.

“Most of our macuahuitl are edged with obsidian, but mine is different. Its edge is as hard as steel, forged from blades traded by the Sun Sentinels. They rarely part with them, and when they do, they refuse to reveal their secrets. Those blades, Harbinger, will save many lives.”

“The edges looked like obsidian to me,” she drawled.

“It’s true they resemble obsidian at first glance,” he replied, “but they are not. We have far too few of them.”

“I see,” she murmured thoughtfully. “What can you trade?”

“Beads, hides, meat, barley, and wool.”

“We could get you steel blades,” she offered.

He shook his head. “We Huldufólk—using your name for us—are bound by a geass never to wield metal in battle.”

“So you want this material because it’s as hard as steel, yet not metal.”

“Exactly,” he affirmed.

It made perfect sense. Obsidian was razor-sharp but brittle as glass. The dark substance wielded by the Sun Sentinels, however, carried the strength of steel

without breaking the geass. If the Huldufólk could obtain it, their effectiveness in battle would increase tenfold. The only question was how to persuade the Sun Sentinels to part with it.

“I will see to it,” she said simply.

“My heartfelt thanks, Harbinger,” he replied. “I will leave you now.”

Dora watched him vanish into the darkness and exhaled, relieved to be alone at last. Now she could commune with Hugr and prepare for the dawn ceremony.

The presence of the Ghost Breath enfolded her, drawing her into Hugr’s peace despite the distant clamour of the bitter enders at the feast.

Hugr had devised a plan to shield the world from the servants of Ormr. He tasked her with persuading the Sun Sentinels to share their secret technology with the Huldufólk, though she sensed this was only a fragment of a greater design whose full shape lay just beyond her grasp. War was approaching, inevitable as the rising dawn.

Covenant

Dora officiated the dawn ceremony before the gathered sept. The weight of so many eyes upon her was nerve-wracking, yet she carried the rite through to its end. Afterwards, exhaustion claimed her, and she slept for a few hours until Hugr roused her.

Blinking the haze of sleep away, she yawned until her jaw cracked, then rose and passed her ladies-in-waiting. At the doorway, Sir Grok dozed against the post. She laid a hand on his shoulder, and his eyes opened at once.

“Follow me, Sir Knight,” she said.

He lumbered behind her as she wove her way through the yurts. Most people still slept but she saw some elders, a few children, and the wards keeping an eye on the camp and the herds.

The Sun Sentinels lingered outside the camp under the watchful eyes of a few warriors. Wing Fà Lom and Nira Yaa Lai Nira Yaa Lai brightened when Dora stepped into the open. Both of them carried small packs.

They greeted her warmly—Sir Grok with measured reserve—and inquired after Aurndögg’s health. Both grinned broadly when Dora explained that the little minx was sleeping off a night of revelry.

Sir Grok stepped back when he saw whom she was meeting, giving her space yet keeping a watchful eye.

“Our Elders agreed that we could serve as the eyes and ears of the Raven,” Wing Fà Lom said slowly. Dora sensed a looming hesitation.

He fixed her with that alien gaze.

“Many fear us because of our eyes. That is why the Dedicated refused to add us to the Roster of Lawful Nations. Some here may even wish us harm.”

Dora recalled Gerda’s unease the day before. While Gerda would never harm the Sun Sentinels, others might.

“Could you guard them, Sir Grok?” she asked.

“I can, Your Excellency.”

“The word of the honourable Kîao Grok is enough, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos,” Wing Fà Lom affirmed.

“The Elders decreed: Ten pairs shall serve the Raven. One pair—” he gestured to himself and Nira Yaa Lai, “—shall serve Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos as eyes and ears.”

Dorothea rose with solemn clarity:
“I, Dorothea Sophidamos, accept this Covenant.”

They bowed; fists pressed to their hearts.

Nira Yaa Lai’s voice sealed the vow:
“The Covenant is sealed.”

The two Sun Sentinels lifted their faces to her, grinning with expectant delight. For a heartbeat she did not grasp their meaning—then the realization dawned.

“Welcome to my hearth,” she said.

Their smiles widened as they fell in step behind her, following her back toward the yurt.

That was quite a feast last night**,”** Wing Fà Lom remarked.
Nira Yaa Lai grinned in agreement.

“It was indeed,” Dora replied. “Your home must be close.”

“It is,” Wing Fà Lom answered, his tone deliberately noncommittal. Since he clearly did not wish to elaborate, she let the matter rest—there was no sense in pressing her new allies.

Dora stirred the fire outside the yurt, careful not to wake those still sleeping. The two Sun Sentinels crouched nearby, watching her with quiet curiosity. Sir Grok resumed his familiar post against the doorframe and soon slipped back into a doze, content that the Sun Sentinels posed no threat.

“Some may resent your presence,” she began, “but they are not bad people—or at least, most of them.”

“We know this,” they both affirmed.

The coals flared, and Dora laid more dried dung upon the fire. The acrid smoke stung her nose, though her guests seemed unbothered. She stifled a yawn, still heavy with sleep, yet rest was denied her—the Ghost Breath stirred within.

“You are threatened by birds**,”** she said as the flames caught properly.

Both Sun Sentinels froze, exchanged a glance, and then Wing Fà Lom answered with grave respect:
“We are, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos.”

“Your kits use slings to keep them at bay, but the birds are winning—destroying the moths.”

She studied the stunned expressions on their faces.

“You cannot hide from Hugr, nor can you deceive him.”

Their features cleared.

“That is true,” Nira Yaa Lai agreed.

“Yet this assault is recent. You assume it is natural, but you are mistaken. An Orc Shaman is calling the birds. Find the Shaman, and you will end the threat.”

Dora saw the promise of death flicker in Wing Fà Lom’s catlike eyes. His mouth thinned as rage overtook him. Nira Yaa Lai laid a calming hand on his surprisingly muscular forearm.

“Peace, heart,” she murmured.

He still looked murderous, but the edge dulled. Tilting his head, he studied Dora with a predator’s curiosity.

“Do you know why the moths are important to us?”

“No,” she replied. “Hugr did not reveal how you use them. He only showed me that they are vital to everyone’s survival. You are not to seek him out for assassination—he is too well protected. To reach him, you would need an army.”

“You have an army—but what is the price?”

Dora studied Wing Fà Lom for a long moment.

“I cannot ask the warriors to risk their lives without cause. And I know you are not free to tell me about the moths, which leaves us at an impasse. My heart warns me this secret must never be revealed, for it would endanger your survival. I need a word from your elders—how they wish me to present it to my people.”

“I will go and bring you this word you seek, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos.”

He rose, made the high sigil, and bowed in their peculiar way with his fist over his heart before trotting away, leaving Nira Yaa Lai behind. She did not stir from the fire, but looked sad.

Dora swung the pot, still heavy with stew, back over the fire to warm. From the corner of her eye, she studied Nira Yaa Lai—saddened by her sorrow, yet quietly glad that Wing Fà Lom had entrusted her with his heart. The flames licked at the copper pot's base, coaxing the mutton stew back to life.

She sat in companionable silence beside Nira Yaa Lai, occasionally stirring with the ladle tied to the pot. Both vessel and ladle belonged to her yurt, part of the endowment granted by the sept. Aurn had told her she now possessed sheep, goats, and cattle as well. It still boggled her mind that Hugr had entrusted such riches to her, yet she knew they were given for a purpose. She was not wealthy for her own sake—these gifts were meant to sustain her role.

As part of her station, she would be obliged to give feasts, drawn from her own substance. Hugr, knowing this, had already prepared what she would need. Though she had never stood as initiator of the earlier feasts, her role and status now required her to host them.

She knew Aurn had washed the bowls used for stew, yet she wondered whether Nira Yaa Lai possessed her own spoon—or if such a custom even existed among her people, to gift a newborn with a spoon. It did not matter, she supposed. If Nira Yaa Lai did not own a spoon, she could always gift her one.

When the stew was ready, she ladled it into two bowls and handed one to Nira Yaa Lai. From her pouch, Nira drew out two polished sticks and deftly set them to work, eating with practiced ease. She grinned when she caught Dora's fascinated gaze.

"We call them *tà-kìap*," she said, flourishing the chopsticks with a touch of pride.

The stew tasted all the better for having settled, and hunger proved the finest spice. Like most Dverg families, Dora had grown up on pottage, so the rich, meaty broth was a rare delight. Nira Yaa Lai ate quickly yet neatly with her *tà-kìap*, much to Dora's surprise and fascination.

Vethrafn stepped into view. Nira Yaa Lai rose to greet him before resuming her meal. Dora did likewise, offering him a bowl of stew, which he declined with a grin.

"I am still full from last night," he said.

She did not blame him, considering how much he had put away in both food and drink. Dora herself had eaten lightly—mostly because of her hostess's consideration—and so she was hungry again this morning. Vethrafn settled easily onto his haunches like Nira Yaa Lai, watching them eat. To her surprise, his scrutiny did not make her uneasy; instead, it fostered a companionable sense of togetherness.

Dora scraped the last of her bowl, glanced critically at the pot, and then grinned at Nira Yaa Lai.

"Looks like it won't be impolite to have a second bowl."

Nira Yaa Lai's smile widened as she eagerly held out her bowl for another helping. They ate contentedly while Vethrafn watched.

"It looks like I have my scouts," he said.

"You have ten pairs," Dora replied after swallowing a bite.

He grinned like a boy with a new toy, though he said nothing more. He didn't need to—Dora already knew how much he valued the Sun Sentinels' night vision.

Sir Grok stirred awake, saluted Vethrafn, and lumbered over for breakfast. Accepting a bowl from Dora with gratitude, he produced his own spoon and began to eat.

"We will be asked to go to war again," she said.

Vethrafn stilled, becoming once more the watchful, guarded captain of war he was in heart and soul.

"How vital is this battle?"

She set down her bowl and met his eyes.

"If we lose, the consequences will be grave—perhaps fatal to our cause."

She did not blame him; she could see the calculation behind his smile. Though physically present, his mind was already tallying men, horses, equipment, gunpowder, and all the rest.

Turning to Nira Yaa Lai, he asked, "When will my scouts arrive, if I may ask?"

She scraped her second bowl clean before answering with a grin.
"They will arrive in time for the sunset meal."

Vethrafn rolled his eyes.
"Looks like I'll need to buy more goats."

Nira Yaa Lai looked down at her bowl mournfully but did not asked for more.

"The bowl is a gift," Dora said, and the words brought a wide grin to the girl's face. She placed the bowl atop her pack, considered it briefly, then looked toward Sir Grok.

"I will ward your belongings, sister of war," he promised.

"I am going to hunt rabbits," she announced, gathering her atlatl and darts before trotting off into the distance. Vethrafn watched her vanishing form with calculation.

"I suspect she could run like that all day."

"They can," Sir Grok affirmed. "They also eat a lot."

Dora did not need the Ghost Breath to told her that Sir Grok had just delivered a veiled warning.

"What smells so good?" a sleepy Aurn asked from the yurt's doorway.

“Bring your bowl,” Dora ordered.

Aurn wasted no time, soon eating happily. Sir Grok finished his meal, declined a second helping, and picked up Nira Yaa Lai’s pack.

“I will keep this safe. People misunderstand them too easily.”

Then he slipped into the yurt. Aurn frowned after him.

“Why did he refuse a second bowl? He must need far more food than a normal Dverg.”

“They do,” Captain Vethrafn replied, “but most of their food comes from animals they hunt—and eat raw.”

“How much does he need?” Dora asked.

“About one goat a week, to keep his strength up.”

“Fortunately, you have many goats,” Aurn replied dryly.

“See that he gets them,” Dora said simply.

Aurn nodded and continued eating. Gerda stumbled out of the yurt with a huge yawn. She greeted everyone, though Dora noticed her eyes scanning the surroundings before she accepted a bowl.

“The Sun Sentinels are lawful, Mistress Gerda.”

“I know, child. It’s just…” She met Dora’s gaze. “They are so uncanny it gives me shivers.”

Before Dora could press the matter, a child came running up to them.

“You are invited to council after dark,” it piped

Epilogue

They gathered in Yún tà shuǐ’s yurt for council. Everyone was present except Wing Fà Lom. Acolytes served food before withdrawing, leaving the elders to their deliberations.

“I studied the site—it is a rich mine,” Gerda reported. “There is abundant fresh water to sustain the camp.”

“I marked out where we should build defences,” Vethrafn added.

At that moment Wing Fà Lom slipped inside, guided by Aurn, with Nira Yaa Lai close behind. Yún tà shuǐ noticed him and motioned toward a seat. Nira Yaa Lai settled beside him.

“‘Please lead us, Harbinger,” Yún tà shuǐ said.

She motioned for Wing Fà Lom to speak, and he did not hesitate.

“Our existence is threatened by an Orc Shaman and his tribe.”

A growl rumbled through the room from the warriors in attendance. Dora knew it did not mean they were ready to fight for the Sun Sentinels; a common cause would have to bind them first.

“We ask for help.”

“Hugr has revealed to me that this assault is part of a wider war against the world of law. Though the battle will begin in the north, it will spread across all lands. What may seem a matter for the Sun Sentinels alone is not. They hold a resource of great value—one the enemy seeks to remove. We cannot allow them to succeed,” Dora said firmly.

“Your blades,” Yún tà shuǐ noted.

“We alone were entrusted with the secret of their manufacture,” Nira Yaa Lai declared, “but the enemy has found a way to destroy that gift. We will share our blades with all for fair compensation—but if this Shaman is not stopped, there will soon be no blades at all.”

“I do not wish to risk our men in battle when it can be avoided,” a grey-headed elder remarked. His eyes turned to Dora. “I am not convinced this is in our interests.”

A moment of silence followed his words—then the council erupted into noise. Dora sat back and let it wash over her. Hugr never forced anyone, unlike Ormr, and would abide by their decision after warning them of the consequences.

After a time, Yún tà shuǐ managed to restore order and directed the council to appoint two elders to argue each side.

Even Dora had to admit the elder opposing her was eloquent—deeply concerned for the safety of his people and a man who hated war with passion. The elder arguing in her favour was nowhere near as persuasive. Dora could see the tide turning, the warriors swayed by the voice against her, and she knew—even without the Ghost Breaths warning—that he would prevail.

So she waited, watching for an opening in the argument.

“What if the war band consisted only of volunteers?” she asked.

Her intervention shifted the course of the debate. Her opponent pressed against the idea, but Dora could see his support waning. More than a few warriors seemed willing to join such an expedition if gain, honour, and reputation were promised. None of them thought beyond that—none considered the larger picture, which she knew Yún tà shuǐ and Vethrafn did. None of them wanted war. And Ormr did not care.

In the end her motion carried. Vethrafn was appointed the commander of this expedition. Then the Elder struck.

“You will join them, of course, Harbinger.”

Dora knew he spoke out of spite—resentful that she had defeated him in council and undermined his authority. Yet she also knew his words were true. She could not refuse to join the expedition she herself had argued for.

“I will join the band,” she said.

Anna closed her eyes, while Papa’s face tightened. They did not rebuke her or try to persuade her to recant. She understood that they knew, as she did, that she had no choice.

That settled the council, and it disbanded. Dora knew her battle was far from over. Little Aurn would likely sneak after her if she refused her permission to join the expedition, and all her ladies-in-waiting would try to muscle in as well. Mama would skin her alive, while Papa would probably break her neck.

Mama rounded on her the moment they entered the yurt.

“What were you thinking, Stjarna Hammar?” she snapped. “War is the business of men, not of wet-behind-the-ears young women.”

When Dora opened her mouth to defend herself, Mama pressed on with her tirade.

“And do not try to tell me you will not fight in this battle. I know you will be in the thick of it.”

Papa opened his mouth to speak, but Captain Vethrafn’s voice cut in from the doorway.

“I will protect her.”

His declaration sliced through her parents’ fury like a blade.

“I understand your fears, but the Empire has known warrior queens and fighting princesses before. She would not be the first. And we cannot survive this battle without her—not against an Orc Shaman.”

His words carried weight. Even Mama, though resisting, knew the truth of them.

When Aurn opened her mouth, Dora snapped:
“Do not even say it.”

Then the Ghost Breath stirred within her heart. Aurn sensed it first.

“I have to go, then.”

Dora nodded tightly, unable to speak. She wanted the child nowhere near battle.

“She is your last, Harbinger Dorothea Sophidamos. I will protect her on the trail,” Nira Yaa Lai promised.

“None of the rest of you may come until you have trained with weapons. I know she,” Vethrafn pointed at Aurn, “has done so since childhood.”

Dora nearly kissed him for barring her ladies-in-waiting from the war band. Most of them knew a little of the blade, but not enough to survive a battle. They would be slaughtered if they went—and worse, they would be underfoot at every turn.

That night her dreams carried her into a secret valley, reached through a tunnel too narrow for her to pass, filled with Sun Sentinels. Kits armed with slings scanned the skies with grim determination. Whenever one spotted a bird with bright blue feathers, the sling cracked, and feathers burst across the air. They rarely missed—but the birds kept coming.

Bright yellow moths were caught by the dozen, devoured as though it were their last meal. Dora could see the Sun Sentinels losing ground, and knew that if they fell, all Lawful beings would lose the war. Only the blade-craft of the Beast Kin could turn the tide—if it could be salvaged.

She woke to the snores, mumbles, and deep breathing of those around her—wide awake herself. Ormr stalked the land with a single purpose: destruction. Fools followed him in exchange for power that never gave them what they needed, only what they desired.

She sat up and entered communion with Hugr.

The Ghost Breath filled her spirit with Hugr’s presence.

Battle would come. Many would die, be maimed, or lose loved ones. Yet Hugr showed her the alternative: a world drowned in devastation and misery, beings chained beneath the cruel whips of taskmasters, others kept as blood-slaves for Draugr drunk on their lifeblood.

It must never happen.

Then the blood-soaked visions gave way to a world free of Ormr’s shadow, a peace that would endure for five hundred years. That was why Hugr had called her back from the grave—because she chose him over her life. The memory returned, vivid as the night it happened.

The Draugr had her by the throat, its bloodless grey skin stretched tight over bone as it hissed:
“Choose Ormr and live; choose Hugr and die, wretch.”

“I choose Hugr,” she whispered. And then it tore her throat out.

“I chose Hugr,” she said aloud. “I chose death—and gained life.”

Hugr had brought her back as a Harbinger with a purpose: to find the Raven Prince who would command the armies of the Lawful through years of battle, hardship, and terror. She was to serve as his council—his last, as Nira Yaa Lai had said—though she only dimly understood what that meant.

Her mouth curved into a smile.

“Well met, Pistophoros, archēgós of Oîkos Pistoárchōn. All hail His Highness Captain Vethrafn, Imperial Prince.”

Then she buried her face in her hands to stifle the hysterical giggles. Who could have guessed that when Hugr ordered her to find the Raven, he would turn out to be a literal Imperial Prince—the seventh in line for the throne. How could she face him with a straight face in the morning?

Tonight was truly a night of revelations. Aurndögg was bound to him by blood, a truth he had known since childhood. No wonder he recognized her gift with the blade—he himself had trained her in the art of combat.

Chosen by Hugr to serve, Aurndögg stood first among the ladies-in-waiting. Yet they were never meant to be dismissed as a gaggle of clinging hangers-on; their purpose was deeper, their bond more enduring.

Each of the five young women who followed her would face death and hardship in countless forms along the path she walked. At dawn she would set them to their tasks—teaching them to survive, to fight, to think, and to meet adversity with courage, faith, and unwavering determination.

War was coming, and they were her soldiers.

Mama, Papa, her brother, and Gerda would play their parts, as would the two Sun Sentinels. Together they would stand against Ormr and his host, fighting on until victory—or death. No other path lay before them.

Hugr had bestowed upon her honour, riches, and people for one purpose alone: to be the last. She did not yet grasp the full meaning of that charge, but she knew the truth would reveal itself in time.

“Let none see,” she spoke the frame softly.

She got up quietly, careful to disturb no one. Even Sir Grok, sleeping over the door, did not notice when she stepped over him. Cold night air braced her outside.

No one stirred in the camp save the sentries, yet even they failed to notice her as she slipped past. Tonight she was a ghost, compelled to walk back into the past. Her feet whispered over the grass without sound as she crossed beyond the camp’s boundary.

Dora walked a mile, passing the slumbering herds and their wards, until only the prairie stretched before her. There she waited beneath the cold, indifferent stars, summoning memory to come forth and meet her.

He came as silently as she—no more than a shadow in the dark until the moonlight revealed his face.

“Good evening, Bridr.”

“It has been a long time since that night, Stjarna,” her brother replied. “How are Mama, Papa, Leifr, his wife—and the brat?”

“They are well. Safe and healthy,” she replied.

“That is good, I suppose.”

“I must thank you for the way you fought to protect me that night, Bridr.”

“It was nothing, Stjarna. And in the end, it did little good. You were slain and drained all the same.”

That is true,” she admitted.

“So why did you summon me?”

“To close a chapter, Bridr Hammar—and to formally tell you my new name: Dorothea Sophidamos.”

His eyes, green as hers, glimmered in the moonlight.

“I had heard,” he said, “but I appreciate you told me face to face.” His mouth twisted. “Not that it makes any difference.”

“I suppose not,” she sighed.

“So—you chose Hugr, and he brought you back.” He grimaced. “Who would have thought it, seeing your broken corpse weltering in blood like that.”

“Unfortunately, Bridr Hammar, the choices of the past cannot be undone.”

“That is true, Stjarna Hammar. You chose death—and became a living ghost.”

“Being a ghost is not so bad, Bridr. You know that better than I.”

“I chose life, Stjarna. And power.”

“Oh, you foolish boy,” she sighed.

The Draugr smiled at her.

Thus ended Book One.